

play

SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S ISSUE!

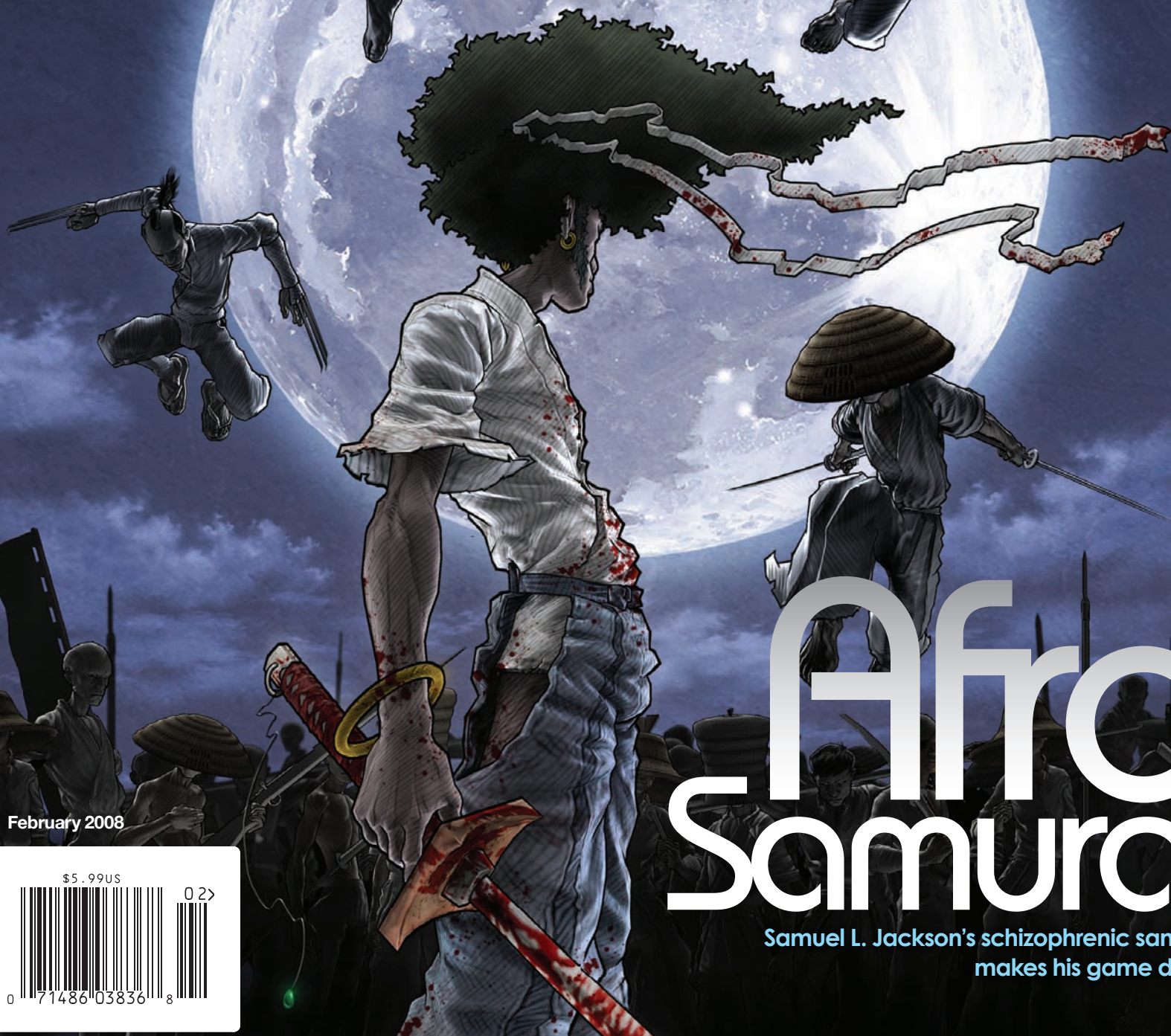
2007

YEAR IN REVIEW

+

2008

MEGA PREVIEW



February 2008

\$5.99US

02>



Afro Samurai

Samuel L. Jackson's schizophrenic samurai
makes his game debut

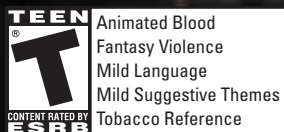
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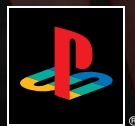
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Letter from the Editor

Holiday jeer

I spent a great deal of time over the holiday break playing all of the games that I didn't get a chance to play over the course of the year—games I either didn't have time for or just wasn't right to review. It's an interesting thing, diving into a pile of games that have already been judged for better or worse. For one thing I cleaned out Assassin's Creed...synchronized every View Point, saved every civilian, killed the remaining Templars, and finished the three investigations I left in every city. I was hoping to see more of what the negative reviews spoke of, but still found navigating each city altogether fascinating as well as completely breathtaking (the second southern-most View Point in Acre—the highest point in the game I believe—is simply without equal.) I suppose it's "repetitive," but I like the gradual escalation of the action and assassination set pieces. I'm simply in awe of the game from top to bottom. Still the best sandbox game yet in my eyes.

I wish I could say the same for Call of Duty 4... well, actually I don't. Honestly, I don't see how anyone can find satisfaction in having some bloke tell you where to go, what to do, and when to do it, not to mention the wooden mechanics, lack of a physical body and faux detail. Things look good at a glance, but up close, Halo 3 puts CoD 4 to shame. I played The Orange Box too (Half-Life 2) and although I find it all too traditional and somewhat crude—no body again and the way picked up items float in front of the character, that's

just broken—I can see why FPS fans are in awe. It is a finely produced adventure; however, after a session with Condemned 2 it just feels so...old. After Halo 3 BioShock is my FPS game of choice followed by The Darkness. But game of the year? I don't see it. Condemned 2 and especially Mirror's Edge represent the next level for FPS gaming.

The sleeper of the year has to be Folklore. Although the Doolin (village) bits are a bit of a drag the Netherworld is truly spectacular. Where are all the PS3 owners on this one? It's a big Triple-A release and no one came out for it. Then again, it's received very little marketing... I finally picked up some new decks for Eye of Judgment too, and the game is born anew. I can't believe it tanked. Finally there's Mass Effect. I created a smoking female (well two actually; I'm on my second play-through) and all I can say is, wow. I am completely immersed: definitely the pinnacle of sci-fi gaming. I didn't care for my team's out-of-context replies when spoken to—so I didn't speak to them—and the texture loading is a bit off-putting but otherwise I'm awestruck. You can read all about my 2007 picks and see how much we all agree to disagree in our Year in Review breakdowns. Please refrain from using any expletives when you pound me into oblivion for not liking CoD 4, by the way.

We'll have the Anime Year in Review next month. In the meantime, '08 here we come!

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Legal Mumbo Jumbo

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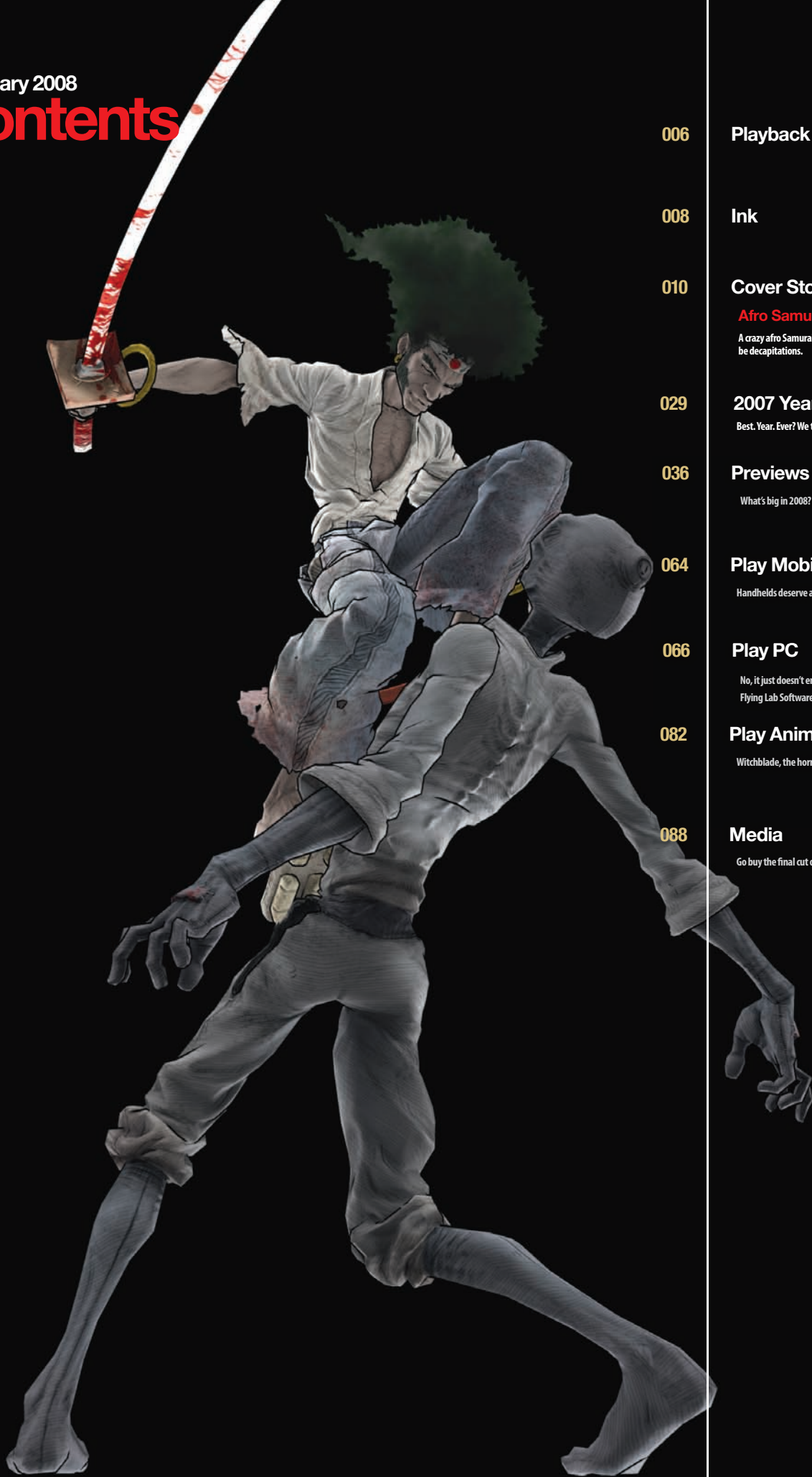
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February 2008

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Afro Samurai

A crazy afro Samurai with a sword that thirsts for blood. Oh yes, there will be decapitations.

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Best. Year. Ever? We take an exhaustive look at 2007, because we care.

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Handhelds deserve a Year in Review too. And a glance at 2008.

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Go buy the final cut of *Blade Runner*. Then read this best-of 2007 list.

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A full-page background image of Dante from Devil May Cry. He is a young man with white hair, wearing a blue leather jacket over a red shirt, and black pants. He is holding a large silver sword in his right hand. The background is a dark blue gradient with some faint, repeating text like "DECEIVED" and "DECEIVER".

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playback

February 2008

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Settling the score

I would like to start out by saying that I am a big fan of your magazine. I subscribe to it and a few others and think they are all interesting and provide different points of view on many of today's games and gaming topics. I would also like to thank you for including the Japan and anime sections. Those are features that get very little coverage in other video game magazines. Anyway, I will get to my point.

Lately there has been a lot of discussion in magazines and on the web about reviews and game ratings. Most magazines' "letters to the editor" pages have been filled with opinions and disagreements about how reviewers come up with these scores and how important they really are. Personally I enjoy all of the different points of view and understand that a reviewer's personal likes and dislikes have to be taken into account. I don't think anyone can be totally impartial when judging something that we all enjoy so much and invest so much of our time and lately our money in.

Even taking these points into consideration, some recent events have made me wonder just how honest the reviewers are. We have all heard the rumors flying around about Jeff Gerstmann getting fired from Game Spot, of which I personally believe that there is more to the story than just a bad review. It still gave me pause and made me do a little checking of my own. This curiosity has led me to my question for Play. I know at Play you have been given the reputation, wrongly perhaps, of being overly generous with your game review scores. This is not what troubles me, I think that the words of the review are more important than the number attached to it. What does trouble me is that it seems that this reputation is especially true when it comes to games that are featured on your cover, or get feature coverage. Some of these games are obvious no question 9s and 10s. We all agree that these have been some of the best games released to date. But there are others that I just can't figure out. I am sure you don't need me to tell you what games and scores they were but I will name just a couple to give myself some credibility. Bullet Witch (cover 3/2007, score 8.5), Sonic the Hedgehog (Xbox 360, cover 12/2006, score 8.5), Tenchu Z (mentioned on cover 6/2007, score 8.5), and most notably Lair (mentioned on cover and previewed 7/2007, score 9). According to your rating system this means all of these games received at least a slightly higher than excellent rating with Lair being considered extraordinary. A rating of 9 seems like a very noteworthy review but on your website under the list of games all that is posted for Lair is a canned release from SCEA. All of these games received ratings equal to that of Mass Effect (8.5) and Halo (9). Both of which are considered to be game of the year candidates. As a side note I am not a Mass Effect fanboy by any means but I was puzzled by the choice to use the first two paragraphs (which I believe are the most important) of your Mass Effect review to describe a tiny portion of the game that is not really all that relevant to the overall experience.

I guess my question is simple, does being on the cover grant special consideration to a game when it comes up for review? I mean no disrespect or malice towards Play magazine with my question. As I have said I truly enjoy your work and will be a subscriber for a long time to come. I have no desire to have my letter printed in the magazine. I am only looking for an honest answer to satisfy my own curiosity. If you chose not to respond to my question I have no problem with that. Some response would be appreciated to know that my voice is not going unheard. I will continue to enjoy your magazine every month and look forward to all of the writers sharing both their knowledge and opinions.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this. I know you probably get thousands of these e-mails a month and I can only hope mine caught your eye.

Ryan

Ryan,

Great letter; great topic. We don't normally run replies but this one merits a response. In answer to your query, no, games we feature on the cover do not receive special treatment. To be completely honest the games we feature on the cover are chosen by me (Dave H. at your service) based on many variables: I like sleepers for instance—great games that deserve the spotlight but rarely see it—and I also take into account selling magazines; so art, exclusivity, and developer involvement factor in as well. In the cases of Bullet Witch and Sonic (I gave the 360 version an 8.5 and the PS3 game a 5.5) I

"...the words of the review are more important than the number attached to it."

genuinely really dig both games (and Tenchu Z for that matter). Admittedly, I tend to see games differently than most editors. After 15 years of playing games for living, all I can do is write an honest appraisal of my experience with a given game and let it fly. For better or worse I'm 100% from the gut honest about what I like and dislike. Most of my personal mail (like 99%-no BS) consists of like-minded people who only read Play and don't frequent chat rooms, thanking me for directing them to games they otherwise would have missed. Heavenly Sword for instance touched many people as it did me... but these aren't the kind of people you find in chat rooms. The chat rooms from which most people form opinions are brimming with negativity from seemingly miserable people who probably haven't played most of the games they whine about and roll pretty much with the tide in order to appear cool. At least that's what I hear. I've never really been to one. I don't read US game mags or surf the net at all in an effort to remain neutral, honest, and sane. Plus I have other interests and (two-wheeled) hobbies.

I've said it many times: if we were a corporate magazine that reviewed everything (kill me by the way) we would be seen as the Grinch of the gaming world. I let my editors choose their reviews by genre and taste so the readers get the best possible angle. And we tend to not review a lot of what comes in so we can let the games we like breathe. That said, I don't understand Casey's Lair review (I'd give it like a 6) as much as he probably doesn't get my Sonic review. As for Mass Effect, I love it (I'm going through for my second time); easily a 9.0-9.5. But Greg lives for BioWare games so I gave it to him and I trust that whatever he delivers is his honest appraisal as a discerning fan of their work. Halo 3 to me is a 10. But I'm not the FPS guy. I despise Call of Duty 4, for instance. I only play FPS games that include physical bodies. We're a small group of opinionated, passionate journalists who truly love video games (like too much—if you only knew) but couldn't be any more differing in our opinions. I believe that's what makes us viable in such a me-too climate. That's pretty much the long and short of it.

Can Wii talk?

I couldn't agree with you more on your assessment of the Wii and I'm impressed that someone finally said what need to be said. No one else in the industry has the guts to say it and my hat is off to Play once again.

I own all three next-gen systems and I'm not a hater but there's just not a lot there for a serious gamer to love. Where to start? No HD, last generation graphics, terrible third party support, wonky (especially when used with the awful nunchuck) and inaccurate controller.

I played Zelda on the GameCube and then on the Wii and imo Link looks and plays better on the GameCube. In fact, I don't see a noticeable difference in graphics comparing the two systems. For me, that's a deal breaker. The only people who bash next-gen consoles and HDTV in general are those who don't have them. There's also the "opportunity lost" issue. Can you imagine all our beloved Nintendo characters in glorious HD on 360 and PS3! What a loss, these incredible games deserve it and so do we.

My big problem with the system is the "simple" controller. It may be simple for mini-games but have you tried to play a "real" game using it? Watching my 12 year old daughter and my wife try to play The Bigs was better than an episode of the Office. Check out The Bigs manual, there's nothing simple about it.

The fact that you "connect" your left and right hand when holding a 360 or PS3 controller melds your hands to your brain and your brain to the game. I don't know exactly how to describe it—it just works on a physical and mental level. There is something inherently "right" about it, probably why it's been used since back in the day. I feel a terrible disconnect when I have the Wiimote in one hand and the Nunchuck in the other. Again, hard to put into words, other than—it's just doesn't work and isn't accurate enough for serious gaming.

However, all is not gloom and doom. My 12 year old daughter loves the Wii and I love that she loves it and I enjoy playing it with her. She has Rayman, Zelda and Galaxy—the best of the best, and surprisingly—she rarely plays any of them. It's all about the minigames at our home—Wii Sports and Wii Play. Same for my wife, myself, my friends and my daughter's friends. The Wii excels in a group setting, whether it's family, friends, or drunken Wii bowling tournaments. When the Wii comes out to play it's a party and there's nothing wrong with that.

For me, the controller and yesterday's graphics hobble the system and place it squarely in the gimmick category. Kind of like a doughnut, terribly satisfying for an instant but not very filling and I'm a hungry gamer. Back to Halo, Uncharted and Heavenly Sword.

Love the magazine, your staff and your work,

Terry DeVore



XBOX 360 LIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

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NPD Group database

February 2008

Assorted sales, 2007

TITLE	SYSTEM	PUB.
Assassin's Creed	PS3/360	1.36 million
BioShock	360	717.4k
Conan	PS3/360	66.4k
Crackdown	360	699.1k
Crash of the Titans	360 version	134.2k
The Darkness	PS3/360	340.4k
Eye of Judgment	PS3	32k
Folklore	PS3	39.9k
Halo 3	360	4.1 million
Heavenly Sword	PS3	211.7k
Mass Effect	360	472.8k
Motorstorm	PS3	331k
Naruto: Rise of a Ninja	360	92.4k
Odin Sphere	PS2	94.9k
The Orange Box	360	295k
Ratchet and Clank Future: ToD	PS3	141k
Stranglehold	PS3/360	166.8k
Super Mario Galaxy	Wii	1.12 million
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	PS3	116.7k

This month we take a look at some of 2007's most esteemed games to see how they fared at retail. Among a few surprises of note is that thus far Heavenly Sword is well on its way to becoming the PS3's killer app. Next to Motorstorm. Also noteworthy is Assassin's Creed's meteoric rise in the face of quite possibly the most mixed reviews ever. And what's with Uncharted? We can only guess that its short time on sale as of this list is the culprit, although Mass Effect and Super Mario Galaxy went on sale the same day. And check out Odin Sphere for PS2, outselling big-budget next-gen fare. One thing is crystal clear: Microsoft is now sitting in the fabled catbird seat.



Super Mario Galaxy
(Wii) 1.12 million



Halo 3 (360) 4.1 million



Heavenly Sword (PS3) 211.7k

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a person's face, primarily in deep blue and black tones. The person's right eye is replaced by a glowing green, stylized, multi-lobed shape that resembles a digital or cybernetic eye. The lighting is dramatic, with a bright blue highlight on the person's forehead and cheek.

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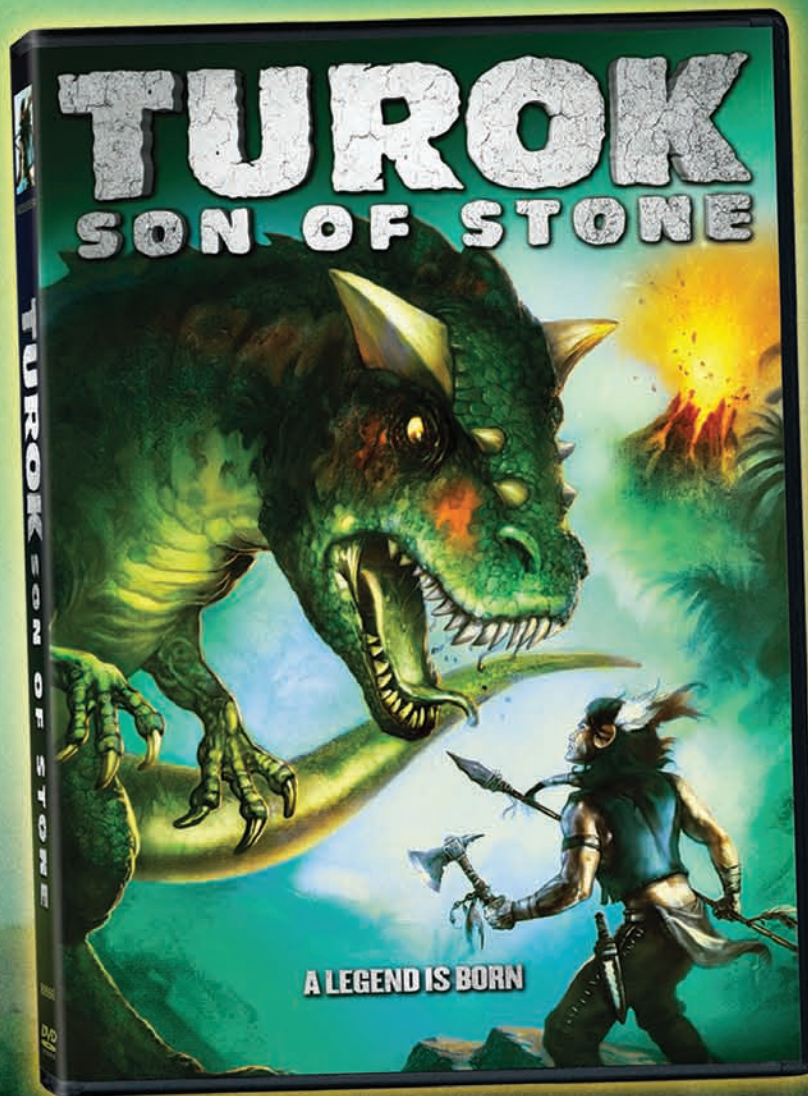
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The results are in for Game Tunnel's 6th annual Independent Game of the Year Awards celebrating the ever-burgeoning world of Indie games given rise by the wonders of Al Gore's amazing World Wide Web. Our congratulations go out to this year's pioneers. You are a credit to gaming kind. For more information and winners by genre go to www.gametunnel.com

Top 10 Indie games of 2007

01	Aquaria by Bit Blot
02	Depths of Peril by Soldak Ent. Inc.
03	Venture Arctic by Pocketwatch Games
04	Immortal Defense by RPG Creations (Paul Eres)
05	Knytt Stories by Niffias' Games
06	DarkSide by Pi Eye Games
07	Mr. Robot by Moonpod
08	Galcon by Imitation Pickles
09	Scavenger by Pi Eye games
10	Kudos Rock Legend by Positech Games



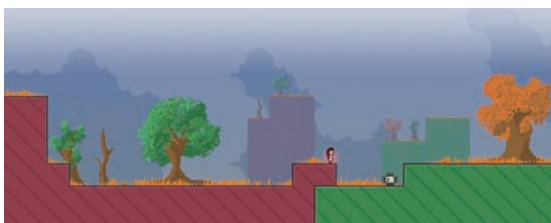
Scavenger by Pi Eye games



Aquaria by Bit Blot



Venture Arctic by Pocketwatch Games



Knytt Stories by Niffias' Games

DK Crush!

Donkey Kong goes Monster Truck!

Attention fans of anything double-wide and mobile: The new Donkey Kong monster truck made its smashing debut during the Monster Jam show Dec. 8 at the Metrodome in Minneapolis. The monster truck, based on everyone's favorite Nintendo primate, will be a part of Monster Jam shows around the country. Sunday, Sunday, Sunday!!!!



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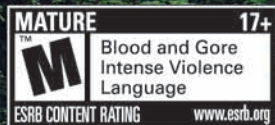
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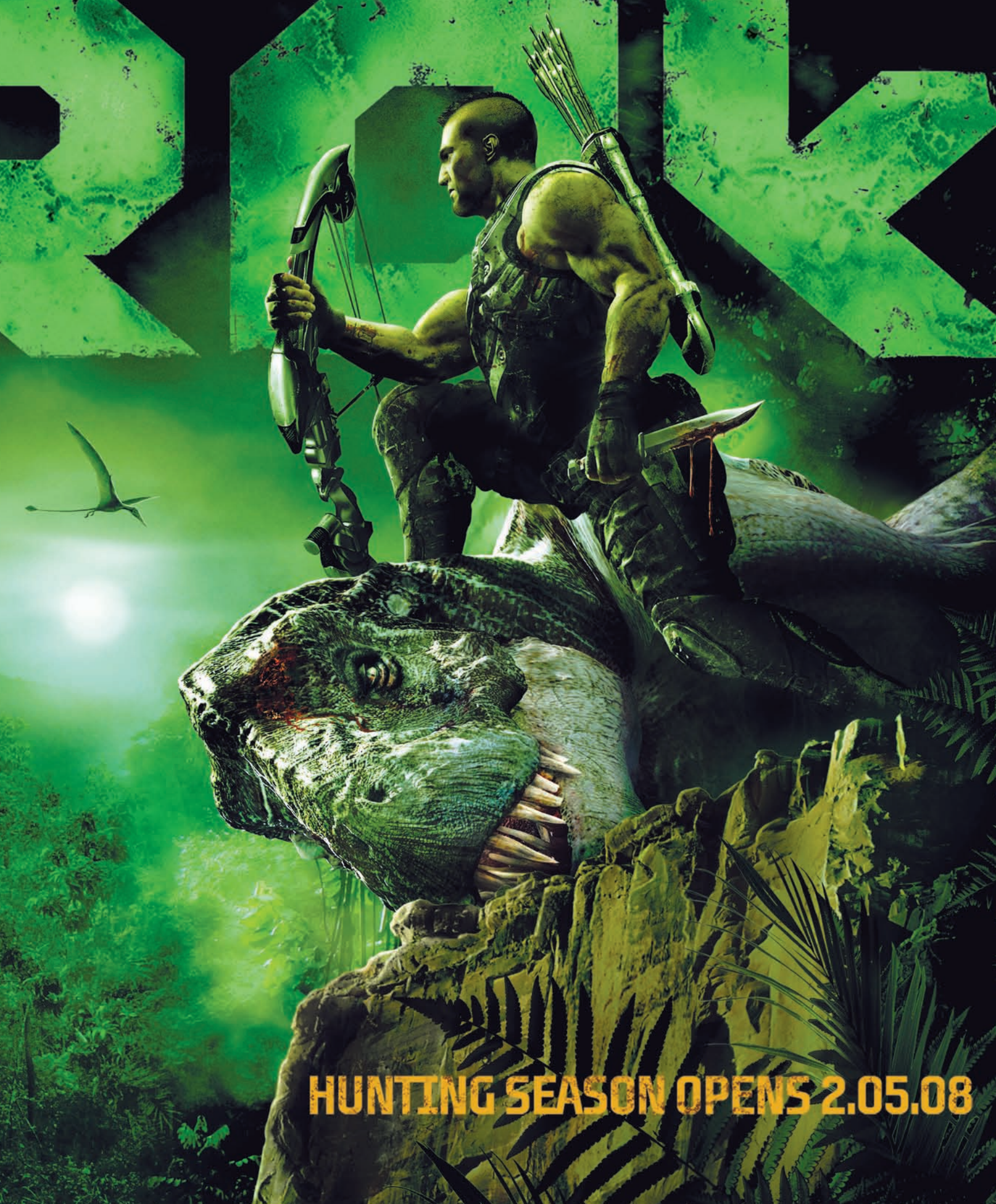


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HUNTING SEASON OPENS 2.05.08

Afro Samurai

Welcome to the 'fro zone

words Dave Halverson







Afro Samurai is a heavily hip-hop influenced tale of revenge that aired on Spike TV in 2006 followed by a DVD release from FUNimation, starring an unlikely Samurai who spends his life fighting to become "Number Two" so that he can challenge "Number One" just like his father did when Afro was five, resulting in him witnessing his father's head's unscheduled departure from his body. The only one who can challenge "Number One"—who is akin to a god—is "Number Two," but anyone can

challenge "Number Two," and so the blood bath begins. Based on characters by manga creator Takashi Okazaki, the anime was produced by one of Japan's most highly regarded anime studios, Studio Gonzo, for a reported one million dollars, a record for Gonzo but tiny by US standards. On top of some of the most elegantly exaggerated character design ever imagined and a supporting cast that included Ron Perlman and Kelly Hu, the hip-hop influences—driven by a soundtrack produced by RZA (leader of the Wu-Tang Clan)—are what attracted Samuel L. Jackson and Spike TV to the project. The rest as they say is history...in progress. If you haven't seen *Afro Samurai* I suggest you leave now. You can finish this after you've had your brain scrambled.

The great anime conundrum:

Every so often in the great anime kingdom a series or movie comes along to remind us just how revolutionary the medium can be. For many the journey began with *Akira* or *Ghost in the Shell* and over the years may have included names such as *Macross*, *Ninja Scroll*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Cowboy BeBop*, *Samurai Champloo*, or *Fullmetal Alchemist*—shows that reached beyond the aisle to earn varying degrees of American pop-culture notoriety. *Afro Samurai* moved to the head of that class the moment the words "Starring Samuel L. Jackson" were uttered.



Until now even the most notable anime such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, which won the Best Animated Feature Oscar back in 2002, have remained relatively unknown. There have been plenty of big-name actors and actresses attached to anime projects, but Sam Jackson delivered the monologue heard 'round the world in *Pulp Fiction*; he's Frozone and Mace Windu and pretty much every time he opens his mouth something cool comes out.

Shows like *Afro Samurai* are slowly unraveling the great anime conundrum. What should be a veritable sensation in the USA, anime has remained a cottage industry. A victim of its own strange brand of elitism dubbed "otaku" (the majority of which prefer subtitles over English dubbing no matter how adept, and download "fan-subs"—aye matey—to avoid US localizations or spending actual money), most of the prominent anime companies in the US have fallen by the wayside trying to coax them out of whatever funds they have left after constructing their cosplay outfits.

While anime has become more mainstream (and more expensive to license), failure to reach a broader audience has choked the industry. Luckily a few companies read the writing on the scroll, and have begun to blaze a new trail by licensing great shows for TV (and all of the crossover that goes with it) such as VIZ Media's *Naruto* and *Bleach*, or developing East-meets-West co-productions such as Manga Entertainment's *Highlander* or FUNimation's two joints: *Witchblade* (Gonzo's take on Top Cow's founding

franchise) and *Afro Samurai*—the reason we are gathered here today.

It bodes well that *Afro Samurai* is headed to a next-gen console near you; almost as well as the fact that it's neither a token versus fighting game or a half-baked Japan-developed 3D beat 'em up. Anime games are certainly nothing new, but good ones are as rare as the one-eyed wildebeast. What Ubisoft's *Naruto: Rise of a Ninja* for Xbox 360 began, Namco Bandai will continue with *Afro Samurai*—triple-A in-house developed anime-based gaming.

You can take the anime out of Japan, but you can't take the Japan out of anime:

The single most exciting aspect of *Afro Samurai*, other than the fact that it's being developed in the first place, is who is at the helm. This is a project born of pure gumption. As I sit down with senior producer David Robinson and game director Paul Gardener in one of Namco Bandai's swank gameplay suites, Mark begins to tell the tale... "Mark Brown—my associate

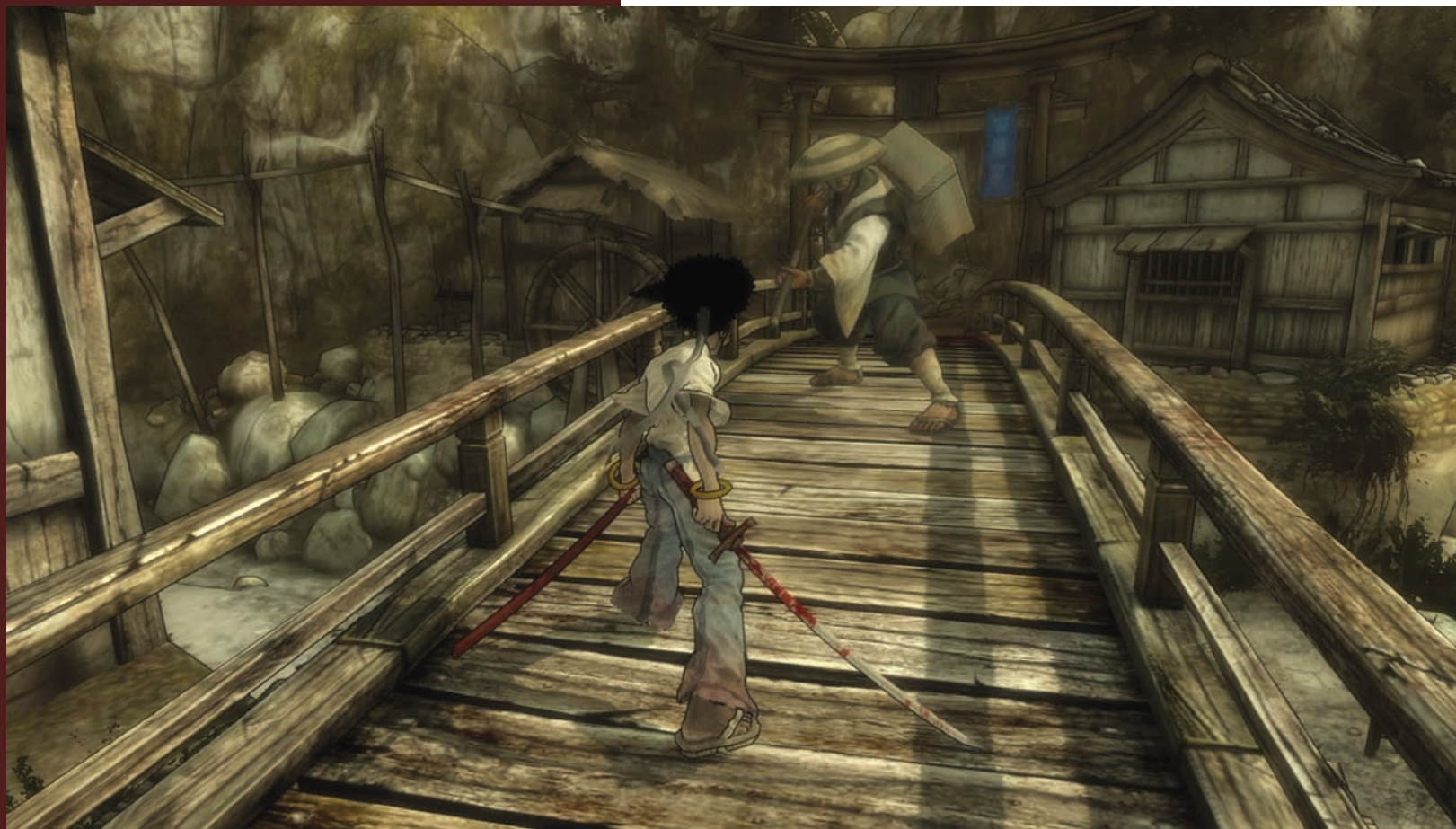
producer at the time—told me there was this amazing property coming out in a year. Of course I promptly told him I don't want to hear about it... "But it's *Afro Samurai*," he said, and then he showed me this..." David cues up a clip from the anime and we all begin to drool as one always does watching *Afro* in action... "When Mark showed me that, it changed everything. I went crazy. I gave Paul a call—he was in England at *Traveller's Tales* at the time. I called Naughty Dog; I called everybody and said 'Oh my god, this is the second coming. Please help me!'"

David's on a roll, I'm all ears... "At that time Namco had no internal development. It had gone from all internal development in the late '90s to, like, none. With this I tried to get it rekindled and it was a long road. It took a year just to get the game to its initial green light because Namco had no experience with third-party action games. Everyone who had been a part of that had left. Gonzo, who brought the series to life, was actually a driving force in us getting a green light. We brought in a couple heavy hitters from across the industry who

"It bodes well that *Afro Samurai* is headed to a next-gen console near you; almost as well as the fact that it's neither a token versus fighting game or a half-baked Japan-developed 3D beat 'em up."

Not your everyday
melee combat...Not
your everyday anything
for that matter.







volunteered their time to sell this in as well. People from some of the biggest publishers who I knew but can't mention volunteered their time to tell the then-president and vice president that this could change everything for this studio and that you should take the risk. It just so happened that Sony was here that day, yelling at me because I sent some PSPs somewhere they shouldn't have been [laughing], and I just said 'hey, can you check this out, because I need just a little bit of a boost,' because I was about to go into a green-light meeting and all these guys had volunteered their time to come in and tell these people that they didn't know, that they didn't owe anything to, that they were practically competitors with, that this could change everything. So he checked it out and he agreed. That was something special. From that point on we were given the go. They said, 'Okay this is high risk, so you guys are going to have to show us—with a very tight budget—what this game could be.' I just made some very cold calls to guys like Paul; people I knew who were absolute geniuses...that guy right there [points to Paul] and they gave us a shot. Over the first six months we created a prototype with five guys and it was this guy doing 70% of the work, with no sleep. Dan Chen from Naughty Dog, Adrian Longlin from old Crystal days... I'm old Crystal alumni; worked on Gex, Pandemonium... I called all the guys I knew could ship a million seller and I said, 'Look, we've got this great

"I called Naughty Dog... I called everybody and said, 'Oh my god, this is the second coming! Please help me!'"

—David Robinson Senior producer



opportunity...' So we did the prototype. What was really interesting is that Bandai had just bought Namco so there were lots of machinations to get the company to believe in such a far-reaching product."

"But they did Naruto and One Piece and they do Gundam games," I say. (Ah, a word in edge-wise!)

"True" says David, "but Afro is uniquely American, because of the urban hip-hop, Sam Jackson sort of appeal, it's kind of lost once you cross. Just the word 'afro' evokes a struggle and here you have this character who is struggling with all these things going on. It was Paul who actually made it happen—it takes an artist to turn an idea into a visual, something tactile, and he did an amazing job in six months. One thing I want to show you is a Japanese trailer that we developed about four months ago, to introduce you to the game."

...And finally my first look at Afro Samurai!



Doesn't taste like chicken:

I'm happy to say that the Afro Samurai game doesn't follow the events of the miniseries. As much as I worship the series, it wouldn't make a very good video game. What David, Paul and company have done is take all of the key ingredients from the anime and flesh them out, creating a much broader perspective for the player. Rather than diving right into the battle between Afro's dad and Justice for the ceremonial headband, for instance, they chose a different course.

"Because the story has already been told in the anime, obviously we didn't want to repeat that verbatim, so we're taking the key elements of that story and then sort of taking a different path through it," expounds Peter. "We're zigzagging across the timeline" adds David, "because Afro just wakes up in another era, you don't even have a good feeling of how big this area is—it's like going across the United States!"



"One thing we've always tried to do from the beginning, and Gonzo has been so supportive is to make the game its own thing," says Peter. "The game isn't an adaptation from *Afro Samurai*—it is *Afro Samurai*. They've given us license to do whatever we need to do. We met with them a few weeks ago and they told us that they have faith in what we are doing and that they want us to explore those new additional elements."

Watching the game in action it's obvious that after a year of "recruiting his butt off," David's final 15 (Team Afro!) are indeed an amazing group. The look of the game is extraordinary. By combining cel-shading with dynamic in-engine cross hatching (shading dynamic to the position of the character relative to the camera), the game looks like an animated painting. At rest it's hard to believe that it's 3D—it's like photo-

"The game isn't an adaptation from *Afro Samurai*—it is *Afro Samurai*. They've given us license to do whatever we need to do."

Paul Gardener Game Director

real animation. The saturation and color palette create a warm yet distinct look (so striking). As good as it looks in screens, it's something else seeing it in motion.

Afro's cutting system is another amazing element. He can cut through an enemy in any direction in real time, slicing off arms, legs, ponytails, noses and heads exposing amazingly detailed bone and muscle. Afro wall-runs, climbs, hangs, vaults, and hoists himself up when on the run, sans any button prompts or mode-switching transitioning for battle. It isn't a sandbox game, although it is vast and open—more like *Tomb Raider*. It's very much an epic adventure.

"Organic movement through the world was what we had to nail first" says David. "Like *Lara Croft* on steroids; and we pulled that off."

The enemy AI is another achievement. Tied into the game's strong hip-hop influences, various attackers fight in formation, and are fully aware of their proximity to each other. If one is injured he can only move to defend himself, so the other characters will taunt, talk smack and give Afro the finger to draw him off. In lieu of any gimmicks or button prompts, the fighting, especially confronting the game's larger opponents, is driven by the animation. When you wear a character down enough to slip into an opening and climb on to crack a few bones, there's no flashing button to let you know it's time to go in for the kill. The body language speaks for itself;



making intelligent decisions based on the character's movements takes the place of any pre-canned animations. Outsourcing a lot of the heavy lifting to their partners overseas has allowed the Afro team to really focus on the gameplay, and it shows. At 30% complete the game looks better and looks to play better than a lot of Alpha dogs.

The RZA factor:

David is ultra passionate about *Afro Samurai*'s hip-hop roots, as he should be. It's easily one of the most powerful forces behind the series. "One of the aspects of the franchise that's really cool is the hip-hop element. The RZA is really cool in the hip-hop world and it just melded very well. What I was thinking about was every way that we could be different; a taste in your mouth that would be different than anything out there. I wanted to get hip-hop into the game but not like DDR or something. When Eric first showed me the series it was all about the music and all about RZA, and all about this emotional exchange between the music and the game... We're trying to sprinkle, not heavily seed the game with elements that we think are cool, and if they work then we pursue them. What we don't want to do is saddle the game with gimmicks. What you're seeing [we're watching a fight unfurl] is the engine driving animation to the beat. It's subtle enough that if the music is



Not all of Afro's enemies are human...

"People just don't know cool things like the fact that Afro walked around with his dad's decomposing head for ever—at age five... Afro is crazy." David Robinson Senior producer



"One of the things we're trying to do is incorporate everything into the game that some producer told us not to put in..."

David Robinson Senior producer

cool enough you really get into this rhythm of how the music is, in a very subtle way, driving gameplay. For longer forms though [adventuring], we have music from people who actually scripted music from the series. My thinking was, what if the RZA and some other important artists actually did a score? What if they did a score based on how music and hip-hop and Japanese anime all come together, instead of, like, some instrumental or orchestra. How would they lay down their own score, and how would that impact the game? So that's been this sort of gin that we've been trying to find out. How it fits, does it fit, but more importantly how we can enrich the gameplay experience via the music changing the game...changing the enemy's interactions. So now what the engine can do is just call a lot of different animations and influences based on the beat itself—it reads the beat—but it's subtle enough where you're not stuck in this button-mashing game."

Even the game's framework reflects Afro's struggle. "We've looked at the elements that constitute the structure of a game and tried to only draw from the Afro concept; what it's like to die or to load in levels—all of those things are determined by

his mental state," says Peter. "We're trying to tell a story through gameplay. Rather than just having cut scenes, we're conveying the story through narrative and gameplay."

David jumps in: "Afro is schizophrenic, we got this early script with this crazy story which because of TV got cut way back—homogenized to protect the innocent if you will. People just don't know cool things like the fact that Afro walked around with his dad's decomposing head forever—at age five... Afro is crazy. We wanna bring some of that stark coolness into the game so people who watched the series can say, 'wow, they didn't just make that up, that's part of the series, but the series couldn't show us that, but now we actually get to play through it!' When I was initially trying to form what this thing was I pleaded with Paul that we had to make people feel as if they were Afro, which is like, not a hero. He's just this amazing character, and Paul is like one of the most amazing writers and talents when it comes to getting characters to flow in this very dynamic fashion. The relationship between Afro and Ninja Ninja [Afro's alter ego that narrates the anime], for instance, is a very complex one. In the past it's been very bad having someone narrate

you through a game...very bad [laughs], but Ninja Ninja is such an integral part of what makes Afro cool. He's not narrating but more giving an expose on what's happening. He's Afro, which a lot of people don't understand. One of the things we're trying to do is incorporate everything into the game that some producer told us not to put in [laughs], but that's not how we roll; we're a bunch of talented disgruntled game veterans who really wanted an opportunity to do something cool that was irreverent that would represent us. We want all of our friends to be proud that we didn't just sell three million copies of Monkey Ball (Monkey Ball is a fine franchise by the way), but you know what I'm saying? Something we'd be extra proud of going that extra mile for."

Looks like they went 10 already.

Afro Samurai

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Namco Bandai (Team Afro)
Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Available	TBA 2008

preview





Samuel L. Jackson reprises his role in the video game. It doesn't get any better than this.



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07

Year in Review

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Dave Halverson

365 Daze: A Year in Review...

2 007 wasn't just a great year for video games, it was downright transcendent. Whether you're relatively new to gaming or have been playing since the beginning, gaming opened its arms and gave you a big fat smelly grandma hug. For me personally '07 was an epiphany—a total system recharge after 16 years in the trenches. Anyone who tells you that technology has nothing to do with gameplay is pretty much nuts. Next generation technology has changed the face of gaming. And this was only the beginning...

My Top 10 Games of 2007

01 **Heavenly Sword** Game of the Year

If games are indeed art—and I believe that they are—then Heavenly Sword is the Mona Lisa. It may not be the popular choice but to me it's superior game making on so many levels that it defies compare. Beginning with the art direction and technology on display, the facial construction and expression appear to be years ahead of their time. Coupled with vocal performances so far superior to anything out there, the cinematics alone raised the bar significantly, creating an extraordinary bond between game and player for the taught ever-pervasive game at hand. Every time I play through Heavenly Sword I get more out of it (and more wonderful extras as a result). There are so many layers within what appears to be a fairly straightforward combat system. The more adept I become using Nariko's three attack positions and evasive maneuvers the more she seems to give; always managing to surprise me with a new parry or animation. And the more skilled I become using After Touch—especially with Kai—the more enjoyment it yields. This is action gaming on an exalted level—the product of a global development effort with one goal: to breathe life into a video game that stirs the soul and satisfies the carnal urge to persevere against all odds.



02 Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

I see-sawed so much between Uncharted and Ratchet for the second spot that I puked up my Boca Burger, but at the end of the day (and night) the ultra-polished gameplay, deftly integrated story and grand spectacle of Uncharted won me over.



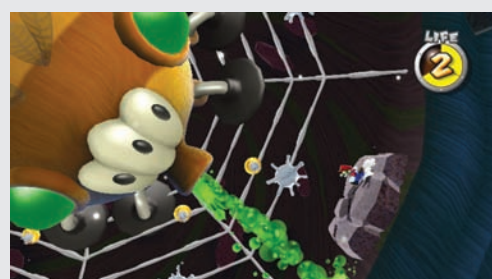
03 Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

Every time I play it I ask myself how it's not my game of the year. The gameplay is admittedly familiar but heightened by Insomniac's trademark wit, pacing, artistry and superior tech. This is a team joined at the hips and Tools of Destruction is, to me, their finest hour.



04 Super Mario Galaxy

Nintendo delivered one of the most delightful pure gameplay experiences in years with Super Mario Galaxy—the first true Mario experience for the Wii, and yet another shining moment for the EAD Software Development Group 5. Not only is Super Mario Galaxy proof positive that hub-based platformers deserve a comeback, but that the Wii is the perfect place for it to happen. The tech is so far superior to anything we've seen on the Wii that it raises serious concerns... This is the Wii that captured my imagination.



05 Assassins Creed

I didn't play Assassin's Creed until the retail version arrived (Ubisoft decided to go with an exclusive review), which given the scores, turned out to be my surprise game of the year. People say it gets repetitive but I only see an epic mission-based playground (like in every other sandbox game I love). It seems like select people looked for reasons to find flaw in AC. Did one of the Joker's balloons get loose that week? This is gaming on such a grand artistic scale that it's altogether humbling.



06 Odin Sphere

The single most gorgeous hand-drawn 2D game ever made, Odin Sphere was brimming with wonderful new systems and multiple storylines making it one of the longest and most story-rich games of the year. I still can't believe it's PS2. Vanillaware opted to pack the screen and allow for a bit of slow down rather than tone it down, but I applaud their boldness, as I do Atlus for another stunning US localization.



07 Halo 3

The lone first-person game in my top ten, chalk it up to Bungie's amazing presentation and cinematic prowess. Assembly-line first-person shooters were a dime a dozen in 2007 (BioShock not included; I wish this could be a top 11), but once again Bungie managed to rise above it all and make me feel like a deity in the process.



08 MotorStorm

Not the racing game of the year; the best racing game ever—period. Real-time terrain deformation, spectacular crashes, amazing physics, stunning vehicle design and diversity to burn make MotorStorm infinitely playable. Will it ever be topped? Doubtful—unless it says MotorStorm 2 on the box.



09 Mass Effect

My inner geek sat for so long playing Mass Effect that my backside went numb. A science fiction masterpiece for the ages, the sheer expanse of Mass Effect boggles the mind and the Moon Patrol-esque sorties painted an ear to ear grin on my face while soaking in the Vangelis-like soundtrack.



10 Eye of Judgment

You want "casual" gaming? And you bought a Wii? Ah-hahaha. Take it back and do yourself a favor. Meet Eye of Judgment; shelf life...forever! I need more cards STAT by the way Wizards of the Coast. I can't wait to see what SCEI does with the "Eye" next...



Category winners

My personal take on the best year ever.

ACTION Game of the Year



Heavenly Sword

Followed by:
God of War II
Ninja Gaiden Sigma
Conan the Barbarian

PLATFORM Game of the Year



Ratchet & Clank Future:
Tools of Destruction

Followed by:
Super Mario Galaxy
Sonic the Hedgehog (360)
Legend of Spyro: Eternal Night

ADVENTURE Game of the Year



Uncharted: Drake's
Fortune

Followed by:
Assassin's Creed
Crackdown
Tomb Raider Anniv.

SHOOTING Game of the Year

Monster Madness



Followed by:
Geometry Wars Galaxies
Project Sylpheed

FIRST PERSON Game of the Year



Halo 3

Followed by:
BioShock
The Darkness

TV or MOVIE-BASED Game of the Year

Naruto: Rise of the Ninja



Followed by:
Stranglehold
TMNT (360)

ACTION RPG Game of the Year



Odin Sphere

Followed by:
Mass Effect
.hack//G.U. Reminisce and Redemption
Overlord

RPG Game of the Year



Persona 3

Followed by:
Blue Dragon

STRATEGY Game of the Year



Eye of Judgment

Followed by:
Battalion Wars 2

RACING Game of the Year

MotorStorm

Followed by:
MX vs. ATV Untamed
PGR4



XBOX LIVE ARCADE Game of the Year

Alien Hominid

Honorable Mentions:
Sonic the Hedgehog (360, not PS3)
Tenchu Z
Crash of the Titans



SIMULATION Game of the Year

**Ace Combat 6:
Fires of Liberation**



PLAYSTATION NETWORK Game of the Year

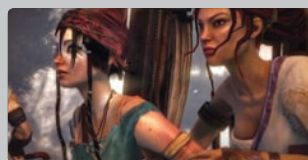
Calling All Cars



SOUNDTRACK of the Year

HEAVENLY SWORD

Followed by:
Halo 3
Odin Sphere



VIRTUAL CONSOLE Game of the Year

Sin and Punishment



Category winners

MULTIPLAYER Game of the Year



Rock Band

Followed by:
Eye of Judgment
Monster Madness

MUSIC/BEAT Game of the Year



Guitar Hero III

Followed by:
Rock Band

BEST CHARACTER Female



Nariko (Heavenly Sword)

Followed by:
Alicia (Bullet Witch)

BEST CHARACTER Male



Altair (Assassin's Creed)

Followed by:
Conan (Conan the Barbarian)
The Overlord (Overlord)

MOST DISTURBING TRENDS 2007

Wiimote Wagging!!! Soulcalibur Legends... Bleach... A chimp can play these games. If you're going to institute waggle gameplay do so with some measure of precision (see No More Heroes).

Also see: Button prompts: Okay in the tutorial but do I really need a big Sweet Tart above an enemy's head to tell me what button to press for the scripted animation/move de jour? I paid the money, let me play the game! Or at least let me turn 'em off!

BEST NEW TREND

Bosses in Guitar Hero!
Also See: HUDless interfaces

Top 10 Most Wanted Games of 2008

(That I know about/am allowed to talk about)

Brutal Legend:

It's as if Tim Schafer crawled inside my head and pulled out my vision of the ultimate video game. I can still barely believe that it exists. I can honestly say that I've never been this excited about any game...ever.

Tomb Raider Underworld

Nobody sweats the details like Crystal Dynamics and they're about to take dynamic physics to the next level via one of the most beloved and graceful video game characters in the world. Lara will be born anew in her most epic adventure yet.

Mirror's Edge:

Much like Brutal Legend, Mirror's Edge is the first-person game I've been pining for since forever. I've been complaining non-stop for years about the genre's lack of immersion due to the absence of appendages, and you're about to see why....twice (read on). This one could change everything.

Fable 2

The ultimate fantasy video game of all time will unfurl in 2007. Play as a man or woman, and live your life vicariously through your Xbox 360. Man's best friend generously included.

Condemned 2

Believe me when I tell you that this game will rattle you to the core of your being. As gaming's first alcoholic lead character—and after his first adventure who wouldn't be—Ethan Thomas stars in the single most brutal and adrenaline-charged video game ever made, which also happens to be one of the most painstakingly detailed and designed. C2 is the best first-person game I've ever played, I shit you not.

Oboro Muramasa Youtouden

The masters and sole proprietors of the hand-drawn action genre on console, Vanillaware will follow up the unforgettable Odin Sphere with this spectacular action-RPG for Wii. The only question at this point is who will pick it up for US release. Something tells me it'll say Atlus on the label.

Ninja Gaiden 2

Itagaki-san and Team Ninja have designed Ninja Gaiden 2 from the ground up exclusively for the Xbox 360 and adopted an "easy to play, hard to master" design including auto health regeneration so mere mortals can now enjoy it.

Just Cause 2

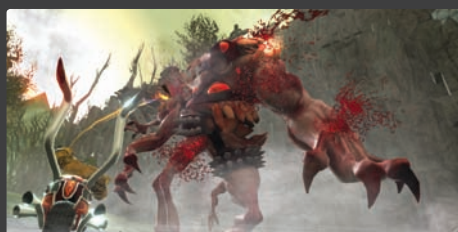
Nobody had even heard about Sweden's Avalanche Studios before they shocked all comers with Just Cause—the most technologically advanced and innovative sandbox game ever made for Xbox. I was lucky enough to get a look at Just Cause 2 before the break and I still can't believe that what I saw was real-time; but it was. The freedom and gameplay of the original now perfected, this is the sandbox game to watch in 08.

Bionic Commando

Capcom wisely diversified to reinvigorate one of their most beloved brands, combining an American producer living in Japan, a Japanese creative advisor and highly rated Swedish developer (GRIN). If they nail the play mechanics and manage to capture the nostalgia of the original, this could lead to more revitalization...like a next-generation Strider.

Afro Samurai

See page 13



Brutal Legend



Tomb Raider Underworld



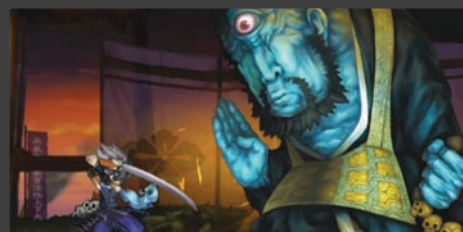
Mirror's Edge



Fable 2



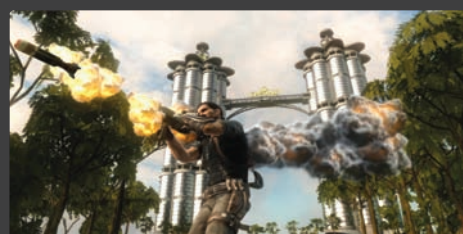
Condemned 2



Oboro Muramasa Youtouden



Ninja Gaiden 2



Just Cause 2



Bionic Commando



Afro Samurai

10 Years After: Top games of 1997

Castlevania Symphony of the Night/PlayStation
Final Fantasy VII/PlayStation
Mischief Makers/Nintendo 64
GoldenEye/Nintendo 64
Shining the Holy Arc/Sega Saturn
Crash 2/PlayStation
Mario Kart 64/Nintendo 64
Oddworld Abe's Oddysee/PlayStation
StarFox 64/Nintendo 64
Ghost in the Shell /PlayStation
Three Dirty Dwarves/Sega Saturn
Resident Evil/Sega Saturn
Turok Dinosaur Hunter/Nintendo 64
Wild Arms/PlayStation
Soul Blade/PlayStation



I can remember where I was the exact moment FFVII was announced for the PlayStation (the coup d'état of the decade for Sony) gawking at the screens for the first time in awe like it was yesterday. What's amazing is that Japanese RPGs haven't changed all that much since. '97 also saw the launch of the first Sony Castlevania which would go on to win praise as one of the best games ever made. Shining and Resident Evil were beacons for the struggling Sega Saturn, while the last of the cartridge systems continued to deliver, with five triple-A games including the groundbreaking FPS (Fog Person Shooter) Turok: Dinosaur Hunter. Not to be outdone Ghost in the Shell was FPS supreme for the PlayStation and Abe won the hearts of a generation. How ironic that all these years later over half of these brands are as healthy and viable as ever. I sure miss Treasure though. It's a shame they haven't broken through on console since the '90s. Something tells me we'll see them make the Wii sing before the decade is out.

State of the next-gen Union...

Nintendo Wii

Say what you will about the Wii (God knows I have) but Reggie was right about one thing: If you build a system for casual users, they will come. Too bad he's squandering them and potentially driving them to the competition by allowing so many dogs into the house. Left to their own devices we've seen how most third parties will fleece consumers while the iron's hot, ordering up ultra-cheap ports and franchise games that barely hold up to PS2 standards. For the Wii to have any legs in the current climate (casual gamers are also being sought by Sony and Microsoft who both offer far superior "casual" experiences) Nintendo needs to institute some measure of quality control. Anyone remember the "Treehouse" where Ken Lobb (now creative muscle at Microsoft Game Studios) and his team used to approve or disapprove Nintendo games? Time to wake up and smell the miracle grow.

PlayStation 3

Gamers have always been quick to kick a given console when they think it's down. They piled on when the DS seemed like the worst idea since the 32X, and they're at it again sighting the PS3's less than meteoric rise as a signal of doom.

Meanwhile PS3 owners are playing MotorStorm, Uncharted, Ratchet & Clank and Heavenly Sword with their jaws on the floor. At \$399 the PS3 is cheaper than an Xbox 360 with an HD DVD player and sales are up—way up going into 2008. In the grand scheme of things—Sony's is a 10-year plan—the PS3 is just fine. With Metal Gear Solid 4 just around the corner, along with Sucker Punch's first game, Level-5's White Knight Chronicles, and Final Fantasy XIII, Sony is a summer price drop away from making a run for the core-gamer crown...

Xbox 360

...But they'll have to pry it from Microsoft's cold dead green hands.

If we've learned anything in the years passed, it's that not only does Microsoft Game Studios know how to flex its first-party muscle, but every last developer doing cross-platform next-gen development goes with 360 as the lead platform and then ports to PS3. Ask them about the potential of the Cell processors and they'll tell you they don't care. They're barely tapping one of the 360's cores and it's a breeze to program for. When you're under time and budget deadlines, tapping into the PS3's power is the last thing on your mind. Cell processing power will remain a first-party/system-exclusive proposition. Both of these consoles have power to burn; it's purely a matter of time, team talent/unity and budget. The only complaint I have about Microsoft is their apparent squandering of Rare after paying a fortune to lure them from Nintendo. They still won't fork over a single new screen of the new Banjo and beyond that they've been eerily quiet. They better announce Kameo 2 or a new Battletoads before I have to go all Sam Fischer on their asses. Then again, with Fable 2 and Ninja Gaiden 2 in their '07 arsenal, it may not matter.

Bottom line

Everyone is fat, happy and healthy in console town... But that doesn't mean I can't play CEO. Here's what I'd do if I was in the catbird's seat...

Nintendo: Buy Treasure and make them your new Rare. Begin working on a killer new original IP for Wii and DS.

Sony: Throw big money at Bungie to develop Halo 4 as a PS3 exclusive. I'd say I'm all Halo-ed out but I certainly wouldn't mind a little Master Chieffette action.

Microsoft: Have Rare begin work on a new Battletoads, Killer Instinct, and Kameo sequel immediately. Forget trying to goose the Japan market and focus on UK and Scandinavian developed exclusives. Japanese game developers, for the most part, have lost their edge.

Nick Des Barres

2007, or:
The Year I Said Yes To The West

The second-strangest year in gaming I can remember—as business, entertainment and art form—was 1995. That was the year Square committed Final Fantasy to Sony, Sega killed its hardware division by stealth-launching a system five months early, and Nintendo banked on ancient ROM chip technology.

1995 was pretty weird, but 2007 was a *freak show*. I'm still trying to process it. As the years roll by, I find myself more and more fascinated with the truth of gaming as a business. Ten years ago I could not have cared less if a favorite game only sold 10,000 copies; today, I wring my hands about it, thinking about the implications on sequels, genres, hardware penetration. Living in Japan makes sales figures inescapable. Here, they are plastered all over the opening pages of every video game magazine and entertainment journal, unlike America, where NPD carefully conceals their numbers behind a veil of members' dues.

For that reason, I have become very familiar with my adopted country's sales figures. And in 2007, they were not kind to the type of games I enjoy. Japan has become a bizarre anti-gaming world, where a platform with a lineup as strong as Xbox 360's fails to crack 500,000 units sold, something like NIGHTS sells 17,000 copies with a Wii install base of nearly five million, and the year's top ten titles are virtually all Nintendo-branded, handheld, "non-games", to use the popular buzzword.

As we greet the Year of the Rat, Japan is becoming a handheld nation. One in five

"Halo 3 taught me that no matter how generic or neutered a game's weapons set is, if it's balanced, it's fun."

And so, in 2007, I looked to the West. How unusual for me...I'm the editor of *Play Japan*, for God's sake. I was weaned on Japanese console gaming since birth, and until very recently shrugged off what the Japanese call *yo-ge*—"Western games"—as nothing but poorly-designed, poorly art-directed imitations of their superior Eastern cousins. This year, I woke up...or perhaps I should say, Western games *woke* me up.

It started with *God of War II*. Frankly, it was the constant stream of praise the game received from this and many other publications that forced my hand. *God of War II* was an ideal (and relatively painless) introduction to high-end Western gaming, given that it desperately wants to be a Japanese Capcom game in the *Onimusha/Devil May Cry* mold. I was astonished. Here was a fabulously entertaining game with bleeding-edge tech, spectacular art direction (one area in which Japan generally does better), and an immensely satisfying pinpoint control scheme that felt thoroughly familiar. I enjoyed the experience so much I paused midway through to go back and play *God of War I*, so as to



Japanese citizens owns a Nintendo DS, and since the launch of the "Slim & Lite" PSP-2000, that platform has also been selling very well. Home consoles are dying—even the triumphant Wii isn't matching PlayStation 2 launch-year sales, and the sort of giant-budget, one-player graphical extravaganzas we associate with the last ten years of Sony rule no longer sell. The phenomenon is called "game-banare", or "disillusionment", by the media, and it shows no signs of stopping. Games that sell in Japan today are simple, pick-up-and-play, and more often than not incorporate some sort of faux self-help element. Over and over I asked myself, how could this be happening? What happened to the rose-tinted gaming wonderland of my youth? The games I want to play—immersive, cutting-edge, story-driven—are gone.



properly understand the narrative.

My experience with the *God of War* series left me with what an 11th century Christian might call a crisis of faith. Are the hardcore gamer's biases and preferences not akin to religion? I had spent so many years ignoring Western video games that the mere act of playing one felt like betrayal. What would Miyamoto think of me now? Horii? Sakaguchi? Kojima (actually, Hideo would probably think it was pretty cool)?

Nevertheless, I decided it was time to grit my teeth and figure out whether or not *God of War* had been a fluke. *play's* own Casey Loe had been demanding I play *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for months, and its release in a supposedly-superior version on PlayStation 3 provided the perfect opportunity. Although I have always been decidedly Japan-centric, my childhood was studded with a great many PC RPGs, and *Oblivion*



brought me back to these in a powerful way. It was Ultima, The Bard's Tale and Might and Magic all over again—massively open-ended RPG gaming of a type completely removed from the Japanese approach, a gameplay style I thought had been killed in the mid-90s by the PC FPS revolution. In a way, it was like coming home. I have many issues with Oblivion, not least its needlessly arcane menu system and hugely unattractive NPCs, but these are mere trifles; *yo-ge* were so far two for two.

Next came BioShock, a game I had intended to play even before my God of War-spurred Western fascination. Who could resist such a unique, lovingly-detailed, frozen-in-time setting...and moreover, such a high-concept narrative? Ideas like alternate history and dystopian societies were staples of the late-80s/early-90s PC adventure game boom, the only Western gaming movement other than RPGs I ever connected with. Although I am not particularly fond of the first-person shooter, I found myself utterly engrossed in the world of Rapture from the moment Andrew Ryan commandingly intoned his Randian dictum. As a gaming experience informed directly by the cultural memory of my native society (i.e. not a complete fantasy starring implausibly-beautiful superhumans slaying biologically-impossible monsters), BioShock was deeply affecting, and is my second-favorite game of the year.

As I grew to accept and enjoy Western games in 2007, I played many others—Crackdown, The Darkness, LAIR—all generally good, certainly worth my time...but nothing that reached out and throttled me quite like Heavenly Sword. I recognize the fact it is not a game for all time, but it served to erase my stale notion that Westerners can't do art



Japan=superior
RPGs? Oblivion
muses, "let us
reconsider that."



BioShock sternly
repudiates the
notion that all
Western games are
set on dusty grey
battlefields.



Heavenly Sword's
Nariko: the best
Western character
design, ever.

direction, character design or cutscenes. Of course, it helped that Heavenly Sword was essentially *all* cinematics, but its fabulous character design (Nariko could go toe-to-toe with Chun-Li as *the* iconic female video game heroine, as far as I'm concerned), varied color palette, and theatrical-quality story sequences convinced me that Westerners can compete with the best Japanese art direction when they try. Ogling Nariko's exquisitely-sculpted face on Heavenly Sword's menu screen was like an epiphany.

Finally, there was Uncharted. What can you say? I don't know how the cards with other publications will fall, but many of *play*'s staff agree it is Game of the Year. I have to concur. The magic of Uncharted does not exist in any one aspect you can single out—yes, the visuals are gorgeous, the control solid as a rock, the characters eminently likable—but rather, in its astonishingly cohesive whole. Uncharted exists as an oxymoron: It is a hardcore game for everyone. Perhaps you can call it Spielbergian, and liken it to the absolute finest of mainstream Hollywood fare. Uncharted is as close as anything came to being a perfect game in 2007, and it's American. I never thought I would write those words.



The majesty of
Uncharted seals
the deal for a
former Japanese
gaming snob.

The Top 10 Japanese-Developed Games of 2007

(Japan Only)

I've confessed. I found Western games in 2007, and they found me. Should Japan abandon the traditional types of games I love so dearly, I know my Occidental brothers will have my back...but the games I love *most* are still very, very Japanese. In that spirit, I have prepared something a little different for my Year in Review: Top ten picks for best Japan-developed games released worldwide, and a further top ten for those only available in Japan as of 2007. A bit of a cheat? Perhaps, but then again, I *am* play's Japan Editor.

01 Lost Odyssey

I'm still right in the middle of Hironobu Sakaguchi's *Lost Odyssey*, but already I am suspecting it may be the best J-RPG since *Final Fantasy X*. For every foot put wrong in *Blue Dragon*'s gameplay, it is put right here: You can expect actual challenge, sensible achievements, and random encounters that require thought. Even so, it is a dyed-in-the-wool genre game that will not win over those averse to J-RPGs. Should you be fond of them, however, this may be your Game of the Year.



02 Crisis Core -Final Fantasy VII

I think *Crisis Core -Final Fantasy VII-* is the finest PSP game yet released, and an easy candidate for best handheld game ever made. With the presentational polish of a *real* *Final Fantasy* (and when I say "real", I mean numbered series-real) and the best-written, best-directed main story of *any* game this year, it satisfies its console-esque ambitions...while simultaneously offering hundreds of short, crunchy missions perfect for ten minutes on the subway.



The Top 10 Japanese Developed Games of 2007 (Japan Only)

01 Super Mario Galaxy

I have a great number of reservations about *Super Mario Galaxy*, and I am far from championing the Wii, but upon careful consideration it became clear to me that it *is* the best Japanese game this year. I wanted a game full of exploration and hidden stars like *Super Mario 64*, but got a linear throwback to the stage-clear action games of yore. Nevertheless, it was wonderful.

02 Blue Dragon

I was shocked at what a polarizing game *Blue Dragon* was in 2007. As what it strives to be—a 100% vanilla-flavored J-RPG catering to two decades of received Japanese marketplace wisdom—it is near-perfect. Too bad it was no longer what critics (or the market) wanted. Even so, I celebrate and salute its steadfastness. It was the best J-RPG this year.

03 Folklore

The best traditional Japanese action-adventure game of 2007? It's *Folklore*. A savaging in the Western press made me bemoan changing preferences in the gaming culture at large, but with gameplay like comfort food, art direction like five-star fusion cuisine and a plethora of download quests serving as sweet dessert, *Folklore* pleased me this year like no other game.

04 Virtua Fighter 5 Live Arcade

Virtua Fighter 5 is probably the most complicated, beginner-unfriendly one-on-one fighters birthed by *Street Fighter II* will ever reach. It represents a game model honed to diamond exquisiteness by more than a decade of experience. Impenetrable to the layman, ambrosia to the veteran—VF, I love your hyper-technicality, and I'm sorry that a mass-market *Street Fighter IV* will kill you dead in 2008.

03 The Legend of Heroes: Sora no Kiseki

Unlike so many other beloved third parties of the past, Falcom never went anywhere—they've been producing a stream of fabulous PC-only games for a decade. 2007 saw the release of the second chapter of their epic RPG trilogy, *Sora no Kiseki*, on PSP, and it is wonderful—ported by Falcom themselves, not foisted on a lesser licensee. When all three have been released, a smart American third party needs to release them as a massive, multi-UMD set.



04 Final Fantasy IV

Square Enix may be madmen for producing 3-D *Final Fantasy* remakes on DS and 2-D remakes on PSP, but I'm happy to reap the benefits. *Final Fantasy IV* doesn't hold a graphical candle to *Crisis Core*, but pushes the DS as far as might be imagined, with incredible visuals, tons of voice, and dual-screen FMV. As a remake of the first truly story- and character-driven FF, it succeeds by placing the well-directed cutscenes that FFIII DS lacked front-and-center.



05 Persona 3

J-RPGs irrelevant in 2007? Tell it to Atlus. Although unconventional settings are commonplace in Japan, Persona 3 was perhaps the first chance most Western players got to experience a non-swords-and-sorcery alterna-RPG set in the "real world". A unique structure, attractive characters and an excellent localization (embracing rather than skirting its Japanese setting) made Persona 3 a critical darling this year, and it was well-deserved.

06 Odin Sphere

Talk about old-school. Gaming soldiers on into an ill-defined future of subsurface scattering and occlusion mapping, while George Kamitani of Vanillaware plants his foot down firmly and makes love to passé hand-drawn sprites. Odin Sphere suffers from many flaws, but in an age when games can seem churned out by committee, the inherent love with which it was crafted shines through brilliantly.

07 Etrian Odyssey

Somewhat like its much, much, *much* larger cousin, Oblivion, Etrian Odyssey harkens back to an earlier age of PC RPGs—only Etrian rewinds the clock further. Like, 1982 further. Like, Apple II. Etrian Odyssey is a game for a *very* select group of people (It has no plot! Its soundtrack is sampled from a 1980s PC sound board! *You have to draw maps!*), but to that group, it was beautiful nostalgia.

08 Grim Grimoire

George Kamitani, after a decade of silence, suddenly appeared hyperprolific in 2007 with his one-two punch of Odin Sphere and Grim Grimoire. Sadly, only the former caught wide acclaim, though I would argue Grim actually represents the better *gameplay* experience—it succeeds at intuitive RTS control without a mouse where Western developers have failed. And, oh yeah, it's gorgeous.

09 Ace Combat 6

Ace Combat Zero was disappointing, though Ace Combat 6 has put Namco's Project Aces back on top. It doesn't hurt that they're the *only* studio producing big-budget shooting games in 2007, but Ace 6 did exactly what I wanted it to do: Take the series' trademark flight-shooting and ludicrously over-the-top, labyrinthine plot to next-gen, with a fantastic multiplayer component to boot.

10 Zack & Wiki

Zack & Wiki's failure in the marketplace infuriates me. People...this is *exactly why Wii exists*. In this first year of the Wii's wildly unpredictable existence, no other third party game has grokked the remote as well as Capcom's crazy experiment. Perhaps people are no longer open to the childlike wonder exploration and puzzle-solving can provide...and I weep for their eternal souls.

Honorable Mention

The Eye of Judgment

The Eye of Judgment—a flash of gameplay brilliance ignored by the Wiimote-waving populace, but one that will not soon be forgotten. If nothing else, it served to show that Sony's PlayStation Eye has as much potential to change games as Nintendo's motion control.

Monster Hunter Freedom

Essentially, the perfect party game for gamers. Monster Hunter demands to be played with real-life action-gamer friends, and perhaps for that reason has only found success in Japan, where a handheld game system is as ubiquitous as a cell phone.

Final Fantasy XI: Wings of the Goddess

Final Fantasy XI has held me in its thrall for five years, and Wings of the Goddess has the potential to be its best expansion yet. Interesting new jobs and a time-travel storyline accessible to even casual players will keep Vana'diel residents happy until Square Enix's next-gen MMORPG.

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

Square Enix was content to lay low in 2007, with a stream of remakes and a bare handful of original titles, the best of which was Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings. The storyline's irreverence may displease lvalice fans, but you can't argue with the solid RTS gameplay or luscious graphics.

Eternal Sonata

In any other year Eternal Sonata would have been completely forgettable, as a clumsily-constructed RPG that happened to have very attractive graphics. In the RPG-bereft 2007, however, it managed to stand out as a decent genre romp.

The Top 10 Japanese-Developed Games of 2007 (Cont)

05 Wild Arms XF

The PSP is positively swimming in strategy RPGs. You have your Disgaea, Jeanne d'Arc, Final Fantasy Tactics...and the best of the lot, Wild Arms XF. It is superior for the simple reason that it innovates, instead of being just another random SRPG aping grand-daddy FFT. How did little Media Vision, a studio that treaded water with mediocre RPGs for years, manage such a feat? I was as surprised as you will be when Xseed releases it in 2008.



06 Subarashiki Kono Sekai

Subarashiki Kono Sekai: Square Enix's best original game in 2007? Yes...and given the absurd FF/DQ-centrism of the publisher lately, more or less its *only* original game. The fact should not diminish developer Jupiter's accomplishment here, however—Subarashiki is a brilliant, fresh use of the DS's stylus in an established genre, and I look forward to its English release in 2008 as The World Ends With You.



07 No More Heroes

Suda 51 is one of the few hopes Japan has left. Overly-pessimistic, perhaps...but who else is taking such huge risks, producing such visionary content? It's a shame No More Heroes, an incisively biting parody of Grand Theft Auto-style rah-rah American sandbox games, tanked in Japan...but I have hope it will yet find a market in the very country it so shamelessly skewers. If we don't buy games like this, the Wii will be doomed to an endless future of party game wobble-fests.



08 Gyakuten Saiban 4

The success Ace Attorney has found in the West warms my heart. In a bleak, cold world of FPSes, this *intensely* Japanese series has carved out a respectable niche for itself, and I have no doubt the fourth installment will continue the trend. It's a more-or-less total reboot of the franchise, starring a new protagonist (to be named Apollo Justice in English), with tasty new stylus-based features. Capcom can continue to crank one of these out every year, and I'll lap them up.



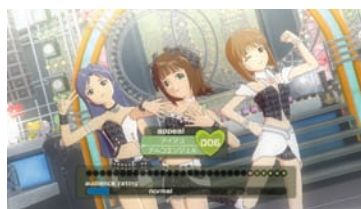
09 Tales of Innocence

It's a shame Tales of Innocence will almost certainly never be released in English, as it is the best non-Tales Studio-produced Tales game ever made. Alfa System, Namco's go-to developer for B-level Tales, has here produced an A-level game, made all the more appealing by too-recent memories of the *appalling* Tales of the Tempest on DS last year. Incredibly, Alfa even managed to outdo FFIV in the visual department, resulting in the best 3-D on DS.



10 The iDOLM@STER

Some games, I think, are still just *too Japanese* to merit an English release. Namco's The iDOLM@STER is probably one of these. As a digital comic/rhythm game hybrid, it may not seem to be too extreme at first glance. But this is a game in which you form "paternal" relationships with not-yet-legal girls, give them life advice, dress them up as you please, and cause them to sing and dance for your amusement. Nah, it would never fly in America—but it's awesome.



Honorable Mention

R•Type Tactics

Irem's supercool R•Type Tactics just barely missed a spot on my top ten, having been beaten out by the superior Wild Arms XF (they are in the same genre, but otherwise completely dissimilar). How often does a shooter get turned into an SRPG—and a *good* one, at that?

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue gets an Honorable Mention for one reason, and one reason alone: The fact that it wasn't released worldwide in 2007. Did Sony believe their incredible holiday lineup didn't need it? Because, hey Kaz, guess what—it did.

Guilty Gear 2 Overture

Daisuke Ishiwatari's RTS/fighting game fusion would have handily made the top ten, had it only been a complete game. Unfortunately, despite an engine with blazing potential, Overture is as unfinished as Gran Turismo 5 Prologue. Here's hoping the full game will make next year's best-of lists.

Imabikisou

Chunsoft's Imabikisou doesn't feature a fraction of the interactivity of any other game on this list, and that's why it rocks. As an immaculately-crafted Choose Your Own Adventure book, it succeeds entirely due to its twisty, turny, hugely-malleable story.

Patapon

Pata, pata, pata, pon. Pon, pon, pata, pon. Ever had a pop song you couldn't get out of your head? Prepare for the *nightmare version* of that phenomenon. Sony's Patapon is all at once rhythm game, action game, strategy game, RPG, and massively habit-forming narcotic.

The Top 5 Game Commercials of 2007

Remember how cringeworthy game commercials used to be? No, don't bother—the entire era spanning "Luther destroys the Gond" to "She kicks high" is best forgotten. If video game advertising can ever be considered an art form, we probably attained that goal as a species in 2007. By simply showing games as they are (but amping up the presentation), a commercial can be incalculably more effective than a couple goons from Central Casting trading quips. I present the evidence.

1. BioShock North America

As breathtaking as the game itself, this is the best video game commercial of all time. 30 seconds of pseudo-gameplay synced to period music gives you just enough information to make you know you want more.



2. Crisis Core Japan

"We'll see each other again...right?" and "Cloud...I have to go to Midgar": These two lines, juxtaposed with CG of aching beauty and ending with a bloody Cloud's cry of anguish, slay me every time I hear them. Any FFVII fan can imagine why.



3. Assassin's Creed North America

Like BioShock's incredible commercial, Assassin's Creed's suggests gameplay without directly showing it, fusing cinematic visuals with intriguingly un-commercial music. It would have been #1 had BioShock not beat it to the punch.



4. Uncharted North America

More from the "awesome prerendered CG simulating gameplay" school, Uncharted puts a single foot wrong by showing a weak montage of actual game footage as a tag. Unnecessary, given the strength of the commercial proper.



5. Super Mario Galaxy Japan

Uncharted's commercial presented an unfortunate use of gameplay footage, Nintendo's Japanese spot for Super Mario Galaxy showed how to do it right: 100% in-game, nothing but, married to the classic Stage 1-1 theme we could all hum in our sleep.



DLC Gives Me Hope

Who says small studios—indeed, even single people—can't create relevant, money-making games on next-generation platforms in 2008? Have these dispensers of sage wisdom never heard of DLC? I saw the future of digital distribution this year, and it is bright. What happens when the average game costs \$15 million to make? Go small. PSN, Live!, and potentially WiiWare make it possible. I can point you towards any number of fabulous DLC games released in 2007, both Japanese and Western, that make their sub-\$10 price tags feel like the bargain of the century. Alien Hominid HD, Puzzle Quest, Toy Home, and Bomberman Live! are just the beginning of this welcome movement, and both the prospect of smallish games from large studios (Dark Mist, pictured), and homebrew developers (Everyday Shooter, likewise) make me hopeful for the future.



Dark Mist



Everyday Shooter

Brady Fiechter

2007: It was good

My original intentions were to get rid of a top ten list, but the truth is, everybody loves lists. I love lists, 'tis the season of love, and without a number attached to my favorite games of the year, no one would be able to get upset and tell me how tragic—irresponsible even!—it is to definitively rate Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction as the top game of the year. Mario Galaxy represents a consistent stream of original gameplay ideas executed with a spirit and virtuosity that went unmatched in 2007, but its compartmentalized boards kept the kind of immersion I get from a more adventurous outing at bay. And it was on the itty bitty Wii, and yes, folks, that held it back. I praise Nintendo for making a few great games and nailing a business model, but I will not praise Nintendo for leaving chains around the imaginations of their gamemakers with anemic hardware.

This year really reinforced my belief that in the right hands, graphics matter more

than they ever have. This was the year when technology served a bigger purpose, beguiling us with old tricks freshly packaged and further refined. Technology does matter, and the new paradigm of gamemaking will continue to show itself and shake free from the still-awkward shell of 2007, existing beside the old guard of purer, more traditional gaming experiences through downloads. Games this year had real impact, toying with real emotional resonance.

Before you continue reading, here's an experiment: try inverting the list below, then replace a few games with, oh, say, The Darkness (developers Starbreeze bring a filmic, atmospheric vitality that's uniquely expressive), MotorStorm (racing the rhythmic motorcycles recalled the uncanny pitch and energy of Wipeout), Assassin's Creed (what a gorgeous and hypnotic setting), Odin Sphere (2D beauty and a labor of love), and Portal (a heady puzzle game set in a minimalistic prison).

For all the frustrations this industry nurtures, it sure is great being a gamer right now.

My Top 10 Games of 2007

Game of the Year

01 Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

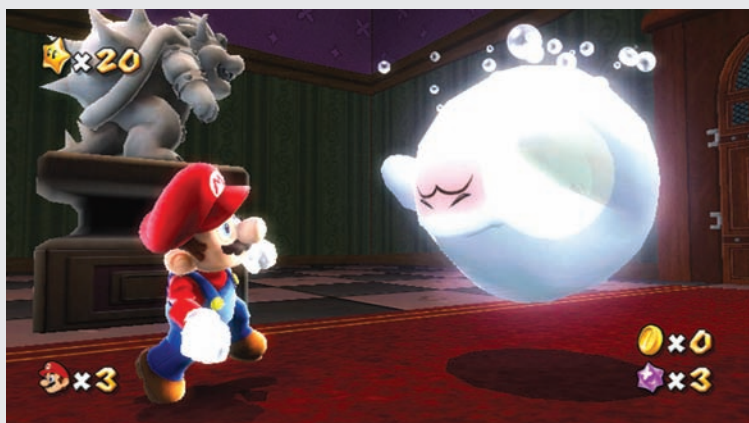
It's a perfectly acceptable criticism to tag Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction as a little lazy when it comes to innovation within the series, and even the use of weapons might have been a bit more balanced and notable in the past. But what made this personal favorite in the series such a terrific entertainment was the sheer scope and wizardry of its many parts. The return to more platform-oriented design may not work for everyone, but the added satisfaction of traversing a treacherous landscape was exactly what I wanted to experience alongside the usual manic action. Even when the threat was delivered more visually than tangibly, the reach of the gameplay was so much fun I found myself laughing out loud in delight. And the laughs kept coming from a breezy story that had the sense to stay out of the way of the immersion of the world. And what a world it was! No game this year was as much of a treat to simply watch in motion. A big part of me needed a game like this, removed from grit and war and reality, and Insomniac delivered with a touch of artistry and craft that left me with little doubt I had experienced my favorite game of the year.





02 Super Mario Galaxy

To borrow a spot-on comment from a friend, other games this year were beguiling veneer; Mario Galaxy towered above the rest as a classically spun game in its most fundamental form. Anyone who calls this the crowning achievement in the Mario empire will get full respect from me, but if I have to wage a nagging complaint, it's that the game made me yearn from more exploration and a deeper expression of a continuous gameplay world. But to disregard this game its mountain of riches for want of something more is to miss an endless invention of design that is extraordinary in its precision and marvelous in its execution. You get a sense here of a collection of minds at Nintendo at the height of their game, working off years of revision and learning. They had one overriding goal: to create endlessly varied, intricate and outright fun gameplay boards that surprise as much as challenge. Within that structure, the charm and wonder Nintendo is so natural at pulsates, in the most unexpected ways. There are so many galaxies with so many angles of play, you're bound to have favorites, but every single one would be a standout in any ordinary game. Cheers to Nintendo for not forgetting, just yet, the beauty of unadorned gameplay in a mechanically complex world.



03 Call of Duty 4

Call of Duty 4 has impact. Whatever it is that games do with their command of immersing the imagination in a space, this game did with a new kind of force. Look into the corners of the screen, the detail and activity that subtly build the world even more. Look in front of you and marvel at the movement and form of the troops pacing through a light that gives them eerie presence. It was not just the awesome tech that Infinity Ward tapped into to make Call of Duty 4 so good. The scenarios, one after another, were bold and exciting, trapping me in with their fantastic layouts and atmospheric touches; for a game based on a modern war, moments of serenity and beauty cut through the storm. Sometimes the ride felt like you were a trailer being pulled by a semi crashing through the landscape, but this was exactly the way the game was to play out: adrenalized, relentless and loud, its scripted energy expertly balanced from beginning to swift end. I was absolutely blown away by Call of Duty 4.



04 Half-Life 2 (The Orange Box)

Oh what a shame to have played Half-Life 2 first on Xbox, because here we have an entirely different experience. As a package, The Orange Box—Half-Life 2, Episodes 1 and 2, Portal and Team Fortress—is, as a value, unrivaled, and as a collection of gameplay excellence, almost by objective default the pick of the year. But my praise goes specifically to Half-Life 2 and its continuing episodes, its unsettling landscape of dystopic dread and sci-fi dazzle existing as one of the great set pieces in gaming. The keenly integrated physics model lends that landscape an added dimension of shape and touch, fully rounding out the journey of adventure and discovery. As much of a thrill as it is to stare down the barrel of the expertly tuned weapons and kill, kill, kill, the AI is not what defines Half-Life 2 as much as the setup and presentation of the kinetic scenes; the perilous crawl across the latticed beams of a steel bridge was awesome. For what really worked on a personal level, the difficulty balance was dead-on, and the relationship built with Alyx is an example that, yes, games will someday foster flesh and blood bond with an artificial life. Half-Life 2 didn't always succeed in its ambitions, but no game since has made similar strides in ideas and execution.



05 BioShock

The actual shooting in first-person shooter doesn't deserve any big praise, but BioShock's ability to bring an unsettling narrative into the poignant images of its underwater grave more than made up for the shaky gameplay moments. There were more technically sound games this year, but none unearthed such rapturous style and tone, such ambition for the artistry that roils in the shadows of gamemaking. For original creeps, Big Daddy and Litter Sister are hard to beat, and more than entertaining confrontations, they served as a metaphorical melting pot to collect the fears of the surroundings. It's really unfortunate that the game couldn't quite deliver on its first-half promise, but if only more games even attempted this brand of progressive thinking. Here's another example of a hint of greatness to come...



06 God of War 2

We often talk of how a game feels, and there is no game in the category that feels as satisfying as casting forth the chains of death from Kratos' arms. And connecting the rageful power of this tormented soul drunk with his anger is a huge part of what makes God of War 2 so raw and intoxicating. Quick-time events may disgust the purest of gaming hearts, but when they're used sparingly and with proper cinematic flair, the immediate thrill is worth a little break in the direct gameplay action. God of War 2 is aggressive, terrific gamemaking.



07 Metroid Prime 3: Corruption

Sure, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption brings first-person action into a new realm with its Wiimote aiming system, but my love for the game barely even begins there. It's as noisy as anything else in the genre, throwing out long plots of blaster moments with wonderfully designed creatures from a strange and distant universe. But alongside the explosions and muzzle flashes beats an adventurous heart, mysterious and isolated. The game really starts to flex its true Metroid muscles midway through the journey, opening up into one of the year's most compelling, elegantly designed games. Art design triumphs in Metroid Prime 3: Corruption.



08 Mario Strikers Charged

Yup, Mario Strikers Charged is the best... sorry... is my favorite multiplayer game of the year, continuing its charm and chaotic fun, recalling the days of Mario Kart in its raucous two-player battles. What impresses me most is how no game ever feels quite like the last, revealing a deeper and more malleable gameplay system than you might first think. If a game should be rated on the idea of pure delight and fun—trademark that one to Nintendo—here's one for the record books.



09 Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

Naughty Dog lost me early in the Jak & Daxter series, but then something happened: perhaps they all discovered my fondness for Tomb Raider and realized that a mystical jungle and pulp storytelling make great bedfellows. Then they continued the inspirations and found a sense of wonder where the flimsy cartoon sensibilities once overwhelmed. And then they built a spectacular game engine to frame moments of exciting discovery and intense, engaging action. A wonderful example of the emergence of modern gaming, where genres collide and presentation shows new vision. As for that sequel, Naughty Dog, pay attention to gameplay beats and you've got a contender for game of the year...



10 Pac-Man: Championship Edition

When was the last time you were hopelessly interested in achieving a high score? When was the last time you felt like you were taken back a decade or two, to a time when games took hold of a different part of your desire to achieve a mastery and progression? When was the last time you played a game and noticed your adrenaline rising, rising, rising, approaching the goal post on the edge of a collapse in concentration so visceral your senses are on full alert? I answer that with Pac-Man: Championship Edition. Pac-Man creator Toru Iwatani returned to stamp out the one game this year that deserves to be called a tiny masterpiece.



The Hall of Shame

PS3 ports/
Wii third-party games/
ManHunt 2 gets censored/
ManHunt 2 gets made/
Mother dies of water poisoning after ingesting prodigious amounts in a radio contest offering a Wii to the person who can hold out from going to the bathroom the longest/
Japanese designers strain to appease the American palette/
Did you chug your gamer fuel or sip politely? Marketing and hype fuel one of the highest selling games/
Burger King makes games, and they sell. King-like./
Production environment still sucks for developers/
The Wii, the Wii third-party games



The Hall of Fame

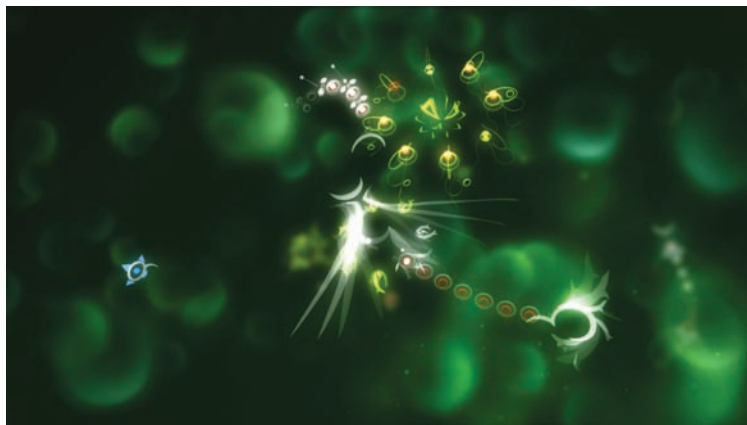
The Wii, the Wii first-party games/
Assassin's Creed sells like mad, and get this: it's set in biblical times and is not a sequel/
Plenty of games choose to focus solely on single-player/
Clover Studios, maker of Okami, strikes out on its own/
Downloadable games show promise for a transformative future/
Bioware shows with Mass Effect that role playing is ripe for broader territory/
Soon-to-be-cult-classic The Nines respectfully integrates gaming into its script/
DS continues to sell like crazy, so does New Super Mario Bros./
Resident Evil 4 goes Wii, and at least one more gamer gets to experience this awesome game/
Folding@home might actually save lives



Arthouse Games That Stuck to the Brain

fIOW

fIOW may have been one of the least effective attempts at radical game design, perhaps because it lacked a center that made it game enough. Without fear, there is no conflict, without conflict, there is little motivation. fIOW had too little structure pulling you through its space for proper sense of reward or connection with a skill set worth tapping into. What it did so well is toy with the idea that imagery and elegance of simplicity can drive an interactive experience. It's a fascinating and noble attempt at rearranging the way we look at games. (Psychotropic substances are said to come highly recommended for the ride.)



Passage

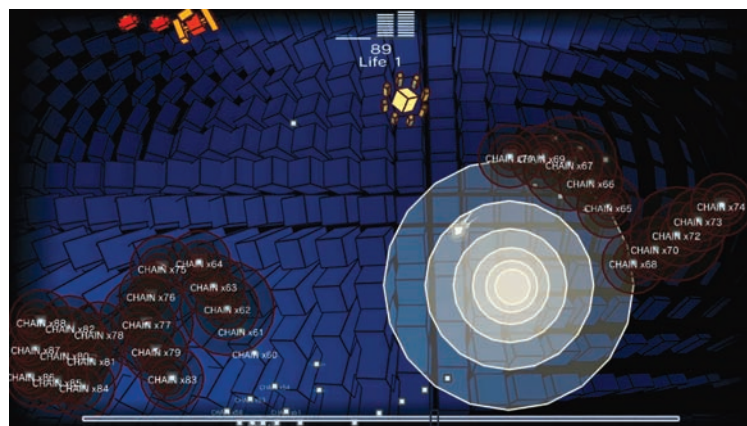
While I began guiding my companion through the crude, hazy path of life, I had no idea why a friend sent me a link to the downloadable Passage, preparing me for what he claimed made him reexamine the idea of bringing emotion into game design. As I continued, I felt the difficult choice that love brings onto the journey, and the immense rewards that choice most absolutely brings. But in the end, death was the inevitable conclusion. At the grave, only death will decide what treasures will be richer than gold.

To find your own story, go to: <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage>. Its creator, Jason Rohrer, submitted Passage to be judged at the Montreal International Games Summit, which displays these works as efforts of art. He was given very specific and, on the surface, limiting guidelines. Passage was born from Rohrer's experience with the death of a friend. As he states on his website: "Your interpretation of the game is more important than my intentions."



Everyday Shooter

Never underestimate the power of sound and music. Most games don't even begin to dip into the well for its nourishment to the experience. Rock Band and Guitar Hero are moving mountains for more reasons than the be-a-rock-star setup. Look deeper and you'll see why interacting with sound beyond the ears is such a tantalizing affair. Everyday Shooter twists its images into the wall of music in mighty hypnotic ways, giving you a virtual surfboard to mount the sonic waves as you navigate a traditional minefield of conflict. You've got a space ship, enemies, combos and chains and the like, and the song being cast is the pulse of the weapon. A game like this is sometimes tagged as "experimental" or "abstract," but don't let the lack of an assured vision sway from the artful nuance that gets under your skin.



Games that Nobody Cared About

Calling All Cars

Some games are just plain fun. They make you laugh, curse, and shout for a few minutes before you go order a pizza and get on with your life. Calling All Cars fit most welcomingly in this category in 2007. The oldschool energy of an arcade sports game ran around with bumper cars and schoolyard tag, a match that still draws my attention when I need a quick online get-together with friends.



Games that Nobody Cared About (cont)

Call of Juarez

Theme and setting can make all the difference in the world in game, carrying plenty of immersive weight when the gameplay needs a helping hand. Call of Juarez struggles in its moments of stealth and is about as generic as the genre gets when the bad guys are staring you down, but its solid execution and attractive Western landscape is a really nice diversion from everything else this year. The two-character system that traces parallel storylines is a neat touch, but what really stands out for me in the end is the engagement of the antiquated firearms, which pop guys dead in one well-placed, highly satisfying shot. In the end, I was surprised how much I latched onto Call of Juarez.



Stranglehold

Stranglehold is sloppy and gets bogged down by overextending its welcome, but there are moments in this game that are original and deserve big praise. For the pure satisfaction of its shootouts, I didn't play a more searingly staged game of its kind this year. Pulling the trigger and dropping the target felt so damn good.



Medal of Honor Airborne

World War II yet again, and Medal of Honor Airborne did little more than add the vertical element to gameplay to separate it from all the rest, but look past the heavily retreaded theme and you find some deceptively rock-solid first-person shooting. Sniping becomes the game's centerpiece for highest reward. If you can get past the unfortunate high-bullet hit counts the enemy takes, there are some extremely entertaining stretches of war in Medal of Honor Airborne.

Ten Things I Hope To See Next Year (But Won't), or Ten Things I Will Say Again This Year I Probably Said Last Year

An end to cut scenes breaking the flow of gameplay and disrupting the spell of immersion, an end to cutscenes that are nothing but innocuous cinematography with zero meaning, an end to cut scenes and just starting over to find a new way to ape film.

The following will be banned from games: special ops, marines, the military, anyone resembling special ops who were once marines fighting a rogue military.

Breast reductions in all female characters and a proper change of clothes for waging battle in harsh climates. Male characters who aren't invulnerable idiots.

Consistently good storytelling. Or even consistently acceptable storytelling. Ok, how about just good enough that we can at least say we're on the right track.

A five-hour game sells a million copies and proves that there are plenty of ways to entertain in lean, mean ways and more than enough gamers yearning for the approach.

Someone cracks the lock keeping games from being, well, just "games." A revolutionary idea is shown to change the way we look at the medium (no, the Wii is not that).

Someone makes an epic adventure game where there is no death. Someone makes an adventure game where there are no guns. Someone makes an adventure game who has the soul for real adventure.

The cold shell is cracked and the visionary souls pour in, interacting with the mathematicians and engineers to put human flesh on a robotic industry.

Someone realizes no one cares about having some vacuous celebrity half-baked vocal performance in your game, and voice acting follows the way of storytelling and discovers quality.

This is a big one: camaraderie and character and expression are interpreted for emotional bearing in the game world...



Ten Moments That Were A Little Special



Portal

Portal

The cake is most certainly a lie, but that doesn't stop us from devouring every last crumb. The keeper of the bakery in Portal is a manic supercomputer, her motherly love promising you a delicious glass of milk if you would only submit and die. Congratulations, she says, I am the most expedient murderer of any test subject that's ever been studied. Portal has been described as humorous. It's also deviant, chilly and one of the few stories this year that actually mattered and folded into the fabric of play.

The Darkness

Imagine this, a gaming sequence where all you do is share a quiet moment with your girlfriend in a modest New York apartment, watching her fall asleep as a movie plays—for real—on the TV. Resting in the center of the devilishly violent The Darkness, it was an inspired and fantastically effective portrait of character and introspection. The scene of murder and suicide to follow gathered resonance because of this unexpected choice.

Half-Life 2

I've connected to an appealing sensation of slight fear and anticipation in the face of a big jump in, say, the best of Tomb Raider, but nothing has sparked a ping of vertigo like the bridge scene overlooking the ocean in Half-Life 2. Thanks to masterful design and a big-screen HD setup, the most primal of instincts—adrenaline—was newly tapped.



The Darkness

Rock Band

I get to touch the musical soul of Radiohead and Nirvana in a way I never imagined, and now I do it with three friends beside me. If you play an instrument, you know the high of creating music. If you play Rock Band, there's a part of that sparkle, and now it's mixed with what makes a gamer tick. This is role playing of a new order.

Assassin's Creed

Standing above Damascus, soaking in the sky, the birds, the vast ancient city before me. Guards in the distance look on, ensuring the bustling streets below are in controlled order. And like an eagle diving for food, I leap to begin the search for the kill.

Call of Duty 4

Is it a little wrong? Would it not be better served in a place more suited for fantasy? Hmm... Let's talk about the sense of empowerment, the delicious smack of the kill as I rise from the brush and take down that Russian target tiredly moving to the entrance of his cabin. A rush.

Everyday Shooter

Gamemakers have yet to refine a language for creation, and the player may still struggle to articulate what it is that is happening as we play. Everyday shooter gave me pause, requiring a numb cynic to give way to the emotion of the experience. Sound and image danced together and made me feel something quite moving.

Classic game revival

Yeah, it's true: some "classics" are good for nothing much more than laughter as we exclaim, no no, these were not classics. But at least nostalgia was tickled over and over as we dropped 10 dollars to touch our childhood. Surely everyone rediscovered that one game that still gives back today. Still love you Super Metroid, and, well, sorry Rush 'n Attack.

Pac-Man: Championship Edition

I actually cared about beating my high score, and I obsessed to points of anger and triumph.

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

The first Tomb Raider holds a lot of strong memories, which came rushing back in Anniversary. One of my all-time favorites was given new life.



Rock Band

Heather Campbell

Heather Campbell's 2007 Top Ten

01	Halo 3 (360)
02	Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (PS3)
03	Super Mario Galaxy (Wii)
04	The Orange Box (360)
05	Stranglehold (PS3)
06	Settlers of Catan (Xbox Live)
07	Geometry Wars Galaxies (Wii)
08	Pac Man CE (Xbox Live)
09	Final Fantasy Tactics: War of the Lions (PSP)
10	Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass (DS)

There. That's out of the way. Those are my top ten games of 2007. For the last two months, as December approached with sickening certainty, I stared at my consoles and thought about all the games I've played. You know what I realized? Thinking about games makes you *think about games*. Meaning, it's hard to really pour over the titles from this year without drawing up memories of all the games you've ever played, in every year.

When I played Halo 3, I thought about GoldenEye.

When I played Uncharted, I thought about Tomb Raider.

When I played Super Mario Galaxy, I thought about Super Mario 64.

Man, it's cold. Today, I pulled my socks up to my knees and turned on the oven. After it preheated, I opened it up and stood in front of it, warming my fingers. It's the end of the year, and I don't have a space heater. I have egg nog, though. By the time you read this, I won't have egg nog anymore. Unless I forget it at the back of the fridge. It'll be late January, and most of us will have finished our last bowl of Christmas Cap'n Crunch. We'll have pulled down the lights and be fretting about Valentine's Day or taxes.

We'll still have the cold, though. You know, sometimes, while my PS3 is Folding, I'll heat up my hands over it before I sit back down at the computer.

Last year, the PS3 wasn't much more than a space heater. This year, it's more of a gaming machine. Imagine that! The 360 remains an American online powerhouse, and the Wii...well, let's just say the novelty of the front-end menu has worn thin. The Miis hang out primarily on the Mii Channel. That top corner channel is usually filled with a minigame collection. And the Wiimote itself? Not even Nintendo knows how to use it.

You know, I just now realized that my top three games are spread across those three systems. There's still no clear winner in the war. Well, I mean, other than the DS. Amazingly, the system that everyone has is the one I play the least. The games are good, but they're not *moving*.

Which makes me ask, did anything move me this year? Was there any singular game-happening? Has any virtual moment cemented itself in my psyche? More importantly, will there be a title on this list that I'll download on the Virtual Live Network Whatever in 2017? Or has a greater exposure to games in general devalued the individual experiences that they offer?

Well, reader, let me talk about all that for a while. I'll give you more than a few different things to mull over, without coming to any absolute conclusions. I mean, you can come to some conclusions. Maybe that's what it's all about. But for now, this is:

Noticeably Absent: Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Bioshock, Assassin's Creed, Heavenly Sword, Metroid Prime 3, Virtua Fighter 5

Game I wish I could include: Naruto: Rise of a Ninja

Game I am miserable about not including: NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams

"When I played Halo 3, I thought about GoldenEye. When I played Uncharted, I thought about Tomb Raider. When I played Super Mario Galaxy, I thought about Super Mario 64."

Heather Campbell's Year in Gaming 2007

I like to play games. I don't like to watch them. I like to *play* them. For me, the most disturbing trend in the industry continues to be the measured removal of interactivity from games. Active Time Events, Scripted Events, and Unskippable Cutscenes are all suggestions of a terrible union between games and cinema. Developers, jealous of the consistency of film, or the certainty of prose, are wrenching control away from the player.

They don't realize that the best moments in games aren't the ones that are planned. The best moments are always the improvised ones—the lucky serendipities that make you shout to your roommate, "Man! Did you see that!?" I mean, sure, developers are in love with those moments. They want everyone to have them. But in an effort to craft a great moment for every player, they're stealing the glory of the unintentional victory away from the individual.

Games are sliding towards communism.

What I mean is, in an effort to give everyone the same extraordinary experiences, they're taking away our ability to play them for ourselves. Heavenly Sword's Noriko dashing down the rope towards a field of enemies—it happens for everyone. But it's nowhere near as incredible as the first time you manage to chain 90 enemies together in a flawless fight. Master Chief's solo campaign is forgettable. But I can recall hundreds of staggering sequences in multiplayer. And every time you're in control of Mario in Super Mario Galaxy, the game soars. Everything else is total garbage.

NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams was the biggest disappointment of 2007 for me. I wanted to include the game on my Most Anticipated list last year, but it hadn't been announced yet. When it finally did arrive, it was often more like NiGHTS the Movie. At least Square Enix had the decency to release their Final Fantasy VII sequel on DVD, rather than make us sit through all of those cutscenes in the context of a game.

Now, speaking of Final Fantasy, it may seem a bit hypocritical to celebrate interactivity in games when the only perfect 10 I've ever given out in Play was to Final Fantasy XII. One of the biggest complaints about FFXII was that, "the game played itself." I could



argue that FFXII was more like an interactive novel, and less like a game, so, uh, the rules don't apply...but I don't have to. The playability of FFXII was in the menus. Games don't have to be about pressing buttons when you get to a ledge. They can be about micromanagement; they can be toggling status variables to achieve a graphic effect. Final Fantasy XII (my #1 game of 2006) was a menu-game. There was still plenty to play. In fact, if you hunt down every Mark, there's a lot more content than cutscene in that title.

This year, I give game of the year to Halo 3. I give game of the year to the set of tools and options that let me and my friends run around in a virtual world, playing Capture the Flag. I give game of the year to a playground.

Let's talk about Halo 3.

Right now, my boss Dave Halverson is not that happy. I believe he said that a little part of him would die inside if Halo topped my chart. Or maybe that was Mike Hobbs, our art director. Either way, there's more than a few of the editors here at Play who are horrified that Halo 3 is number one on my list. Maybe, like you, they stopped reading two pages ago when they saw the breakdown.

I'm not giving the number one spot to Halo 3 because of the single player mode. Nor am I awarding it to the co-op mode (though playing it through with a friend in Tokyo was one of the best gaming experiences I've had in awhile). I am celebrating Halo's multiplayer. I am giving the top slot to Forge, to Theater, to the endless variations offered by the most complicated enemies available in video games. And yeah, that would be other people.

I've talked about the video-sharing feature of Halo 3 in Play before. Last month's

“Active Time Events, Scripted Events, and Unskippable Cutscenes are all suggestions of a terrible union between games and cinema.”

Back of the Book was all about streamlining and file sharing. Halo 3 taught me that games could be really fun to watch.

But it also taught me that my friend is a pretty great designer. He didn't know it going in, but after a couple months in Forge, he'd managed to craft a really hilarious level that everyone enjoys playing. Halo 3 taught me that no matter how generic or neutered a game's weapons set is, if it's balanced, it's fun. Halo 3 taught me that watching game videos could mean an entire evening's entertainment.

What Halo 3 is, is *playing* a game. Other than waiting for matchmaking to finish, or a map to load, all you do in multiplayer is actually play. That's why it's number one, folks.

But what about Call of Duty 4, then?

Well, to be honest, I think there's a lot of questions that a game like Modern Warfare brings up. I'm only going to get political here for a second, but in a time when our foreign policy seems to be of questionable conscientiousness, it doesn't seem like the most socially responsible choice is to publish a game where a group of Western soldiers invade a devastated middle-eastern city and kill a bunch of Arab speaking antagonists. I know the game is about an ultra-conservative Russian faction, but large parts of the title take place in what looks like virtual Baghdad.

Is this the sort of game we're going to be proud of in 20 years? Every Arabic-speaking person you encounter in the game is a villain, and with spawning designed as it is, you can literally kill endless Middle Eastern enemies. I can't help but think that these sequences will engender the same sort of uneasiness in 20 years that anti-Japanese WWII Warner Bros. cartoons do today. Mind you, I'm not saying that in the context of the game, the military action isn't unmotivated. It's just...I'm not sure that we should be turning our modern conflicts into mindless entertainment just yet. It feels like programming for programming, if you know what I mean. Call of Duty 4 makes me uncomfortable. I can't play it in a vacuum.

Think of it another way. Play Magazine is published in Saudi Arabia. What do you

“Halo 3 taught me that no matter how generic or neutered a game's weapons set is, if it's balanced, it's fun.”

think they make of our relentlessly jingoistic American and British soldiers running and gunning through the COD4 theatre? As an American who has lived a few years abroad, I can say that the reaction would be mixed, at best.

So let's talk about something else, shall we?

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune isn't selling as well as Call of Duty 4. That's a damn shame. Uncharted is a beautiful game, both in execution and design. The story is compelling, and the writing is catchy, personable stuff. And that Nathan Drake? He's a pretty great hero.

When I first played the demo a year ago or whatever, I (embarrassingly) couldn't get past the generic look of Drake. He's like Dr. Keanu Shepard. He's Ben Affable. He's boring... When you're on a show floor and you can't hear what he's wincing out in-between getting shot at and jumping across ridiculous ravines. Turns out, with the volume turned up, Drake's a very cool guy. I don't know that I've ever wanted to hang out with a game hero as much as I do him. Drake's got charm.

And you know what? Charming may be one of the best ways to describe a game like





Uncharted. Atmospheric is obviously another. As I wrote earlier, it recalls the best parts of the original Tomb Raider. Remember, at the time of PS1, we saw past the low-poly count—the blocky suggestions of landscapes—and filled in the blanks with our brains. Now, I can't bear to look at the original Tomb Raider; as technology has progressed, so has our ability to satisfy the spaces between real and imagined. Uncharted looks like my memory of Tomb Raider.

"I think games should be more like albums, and less like movies."

Uncharted would be number one on my list if I thought I might play it again after finishing it. But the truth is, a year from now it'll be on my shelf, holding a place among many of the best games I've ever played. Uncharted will sit right next to Ico.

Halo 3 on the other hand? It might be in my 360.

See, I think games should be more like albums, and less like movies. Video games—like music—are active, reflective affairs. Films are something that happen to you. Music and video games are something you engage.

Which brings us to Mario.

I actually sighed as I finished typing that sentence.

"Mario! You can use your eyes to read!"

Mario used to be a game only. Now, it's a story, shoved into the once-seamless places which used to be the short silences between levels. Mario isn't number one because when I drop in the disc, and start it up, I have to *find the game*. I have to run around that stupid space ship, looking for the place where I can enter the level that will let me find my 235th star.

"Hey Mario! Use your eyes to read!!!"

Remember what used to happen between levels in Super Mario? Nothing. You'd get a glimpse of the level title, the number of Marios you had *left*, and then it would begin. Even Super Mario 3 only had a 2-3 second world map, and then, bam, you were *jumping*. Now, in-between the interactive portions of Super Mario Galaxy, there are storybooks and cutscenes and second princesses. Whenever you go up against a boss, you get a flow-breaking five-second camera pan of...the boss you're about to fight. These are the reasons why Mario isn't number one.

"Hey, Mario! Use your eyes to read!!!"

But the reasons Mario is the number *three* game of the year include the few sweet sections where it reminds me of the sounds of my dorm room when Mario 64 came out. It's number three because of the way the music triumphs during the best levels. It's number three because of the dizzy joy of z-jumping to a platform you're not supposed to



be at yet.

But if Mario isn't careful, he's going to go the way of Zelda. He's already lighting torches to open doors. And that is simply not forgivable.

The Orange Box and Stranglehold are the two sides of my gaming personality. One is elegant, careful, and deliberate. The other is dumb and unreasonable; mindless like an injured ox, with an oft-broken camera. Half-Life 2 is the sequel to a video game, and continues to tell a pretty great story. Stranglehold is the sequel to an action movie, and ignores nearly everything that the original put forth about honor and the camaraderie of men. Half-Life 2 is its silent protagonist. Stranglehold is the brassy nonsense of a hero that shouts with endless ammo.

But if I'm playing either of these packages (Portal included) on a given day, they're satisfying the same thing, somehow. I'm not in love with Orange Box or Stranglehold. They're distant; they lack the intimacy of a game that really grips me. Orange Box is so low on the list because of my taste in games and fiction. Stranglehold is so high because of my taste, again, in games and fiction. Indeed, once we get to number five, it's really a matter of taste, isn't it?

I really like Stranglehold. I really appreciate The Orange Box. Portal has some of the best writing I've ever heard in a game. Stranglehold has some of the worst.

But one of them is a *lot* of fun.

One more note:

Settlers of Catan is a board game.

It crashes far too often.

It's the most addictive thing on Live.

The rest of the top ten are there to finish the list. Given what I've said about Playing a Game, it should be pretty self-explanatory.

I didn't like BioShock. I thought it tried too hard.

"I really like Stranglehold. I really appreciate The Orange Box."

We're now two months into 2008, two years before the decade ends, and four years before the Mayan calendar runs out. What games am I looking forward to as we hurtle towards the Facebook-induced End of Privacy? Well, at the top of my list of games I'm looking forward to is a silly Square Enix action title for the DS called The World Ends With You. It's a Tetsuya Nomura fashionable disaster, and I'm sure to be disappointed by it once I actually get my hands on it. Can you imagine the cutscenes? Still, most of the game takes place at Shibuya, and it's an original IP from S-E for the first time in years.

I'm holding my breath over Street Fighter IV (Third Strike remains my favorite game of all time, and is the oldest game in my active playlist), and the same goes for Final Fantasy XIII. Anyway, they might come out in 2010 for all we know.

Let's see, what else? No More Heroes will be fantastic. It's the third or fourth *video game* to actually come out on the Wii. And there's Grand Theft Auto IV. It might have some game in it, but so far all of the trailers have been...scripted. I'm excited about Little Big Planet, I'm excited about Soul Caliber 4, and I'm excited about more people buying a PlayStation 3. My friends list is woefully short.

But my excitement is secondary to my trepidation. I'm nervous that the industry will continue down the trend of counter-interactivity. That gaming will be consigned to (ugh) minigames, and larger titles will become more and more cinematic and less playable. If developers can't figure out a way to make these moments *ours*, then I beg them to simply edit them out.

Cut out the cutscenes. Give us back the Active in our Timed Events. And let *us* script the moments that we find in our virtual worlds.

The name of this magazine, after all, is Play.

All your clichés

Ah, the year-end wrap-up. It's perhaps the most sacred of traditions and, simultaneously, hoariest of clichés for the video game critic. Frankly, one day modern technology will be able to create a device so fiendishly clever as to be able to output a series of trite analyses, spew reheated opinions on video games not played or (mostly) long forgotten, dash off some misplaced optimism for the future, and offer wispy sentimentality in bucketsful. This new device, born of science and steel and powered by handcrank and moxie, shall be called the Inspidator 5035. You had better believe it will begin every piece of text with "It's a great time to be a game fan."

It will vomit forth 15 top-10 lists per hour; be capable of making delightful Duke Nukem Forever jokes (and delicious puns!) at a fourth-grade level; and can reference such Internet phenomenon as all your base are belong to us, cats, and Star Wars kid. Soulless and devoid of shame, the Inspidator 5035 is capable of heaping praise on the most tired and overworked game franchises everyone publicly worships but secretly reviles and shuns in the manner of a rapist with a case of the bubonic plague. It can, without the slightest bit of ironic awareness, also bestow kudos on games such as Cooking Mama and Cake Mania, titles designed for, and marketed to, retarded 8-year-old girls.

There will be no piece of trite sentiment or overdone nostalgia the Inspidator 5035 cannot mete out. It will be possible, say, in a given retrospective, for this machine to pine over the Virtual Boy or any modern equivalent. It could herald Wii Sports as the vanguard of a new era, stretching by miles and miles the definition of the word "revolution" so that it now can be applied to anything, including a video game's popularity among senior citizens.

For both the reader and the writer of the year-end wrap-up, the Inspidator cannot be invented quickly enough. This, then, is the hero we are holding out for. This, then, is the future; a future that will be, no doubt, an absolutely smashing time to be a game fan.

Play this

The year of our lord 2007 A.D. was certainly a magnificent time to be a game fan. With the next generation of game consoles from Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony firmly in place, fans of electronic entertainment were treated to an avalanche of quality titles not seen since, well, perhaps forever. These games of 2007, from Assassin's Creed to Warhawk, will no doubt be celebrated and ranked extensively within these pages. What follows is not a list of the year's best titles. Those seeking validation that their favorite game has, in fact, come in at number three (or higher) on the top-10 can look elsewhere.

These are games that demand to be played.

Rock Band

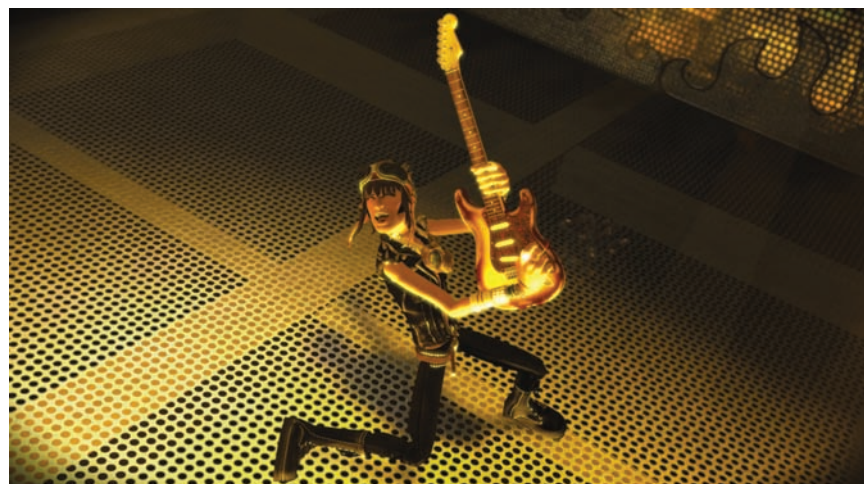
Why you should play it: Give me the beat, boys ...

In a year where the obnoxiously loud flushing sound meant that the quality of quality control was now heading with dispatch through the pipes to the treatment plant, Electronic Arts shipped the rhythm-based Rock Band with busted guitars.

The auspicious debut plus the game's hefty \$169 price tag might well have relegated Rock Band to the status of the faux musical combo Damnocracy, a curiosity to be briefly stared at and then quickly forgotten.

Yet Rock Band persevered. It was simply too good to be ignored, and Electronic Arts' skillful use of downloadable content cemented the game's status. Rock Band will, no doubt, see many iterations and reworkings in the coming year.

Past the game's quality and its wonderfully enjoyable cooperative mechanic, Rock Band is also remarkable for what it presents to players. No one would ever assume that hammering on a plastic guitar serves as training for playing the real thing, but this is not the case with Rock Band's plastic drums. Here, the game actually serves as a passable simulation for real-life drumming; Rock Band won't likely produce any John Bonhams or Phil Rudds, but it can, remarkably, teach a novice to keep simple rhythms on an actual drum kit.



LAIR

Why you should play it: To properly understand the definition of hubris.

Look upon Lair as a cautionary tale.

Much-hyped and eagerly anticipated, Lair promised dragon-based fighting on foot and in the air. Players took the role of Rohn, a knight who was paired up with a powerful fire-breathing terror and asked to fight a brutal war. All the elements were in place: a series of gorgeous environments, oversized behemoths to ride, and the chance to tear through a host of human and bestial enemies.

Yet both Sony and Factor Five took the gun that was Lair, pointed it at their collective feet, and pulled the trigger. For the flight segments, the game offered control only via the PlayStation 3's Sixaxis motion controls. This meant, roughly, that the majority of Lair was the video game equivalent of driving a car drunk—and with one's knees. Getting the player's dragon to perform bashes, loops, and dives was more or less impossible; the motion controls simply weren't responsive enough, say, to recognize that a player had jerked the Sixaxis upward to perform an Immelman turn or pointed the controller down and to the left to make the dragon bank and dive simultaneously.

Oddly, Lair let players use analog controls for the on-foot segments.

It's uncertain what the developers were thinking when they made these very basic gameplay decisions. Whatever the rationale, the decision to not include analog controls for the flight segments reeks of both pride and a disdain for the game's audience. In attempting to create a "realistic" flight experience while pushing the PlayStation 3 motion controls, Factor Five and Sony decided they knew best, and to hell with anyone who wanted an alternate control scheme.

Like a player in an ancient Greek tragedy, Sony and Factor Five simply didn't get it. Best of all, when the smoke cleared and Lair was revealed to be a steaming pile, Sony further demonstrated its fatal pride when it sent out—and this is very much true—a full-color, 20-plus page "reviewer's guide" for its misunderstood game well after many reviews had already been published. See, for Sony, the negative reviews for Lair didn't mean that the game was an ass sandwich, but rather that people weren't playing it correctly.



Half-Life 2 (The Orange Box)

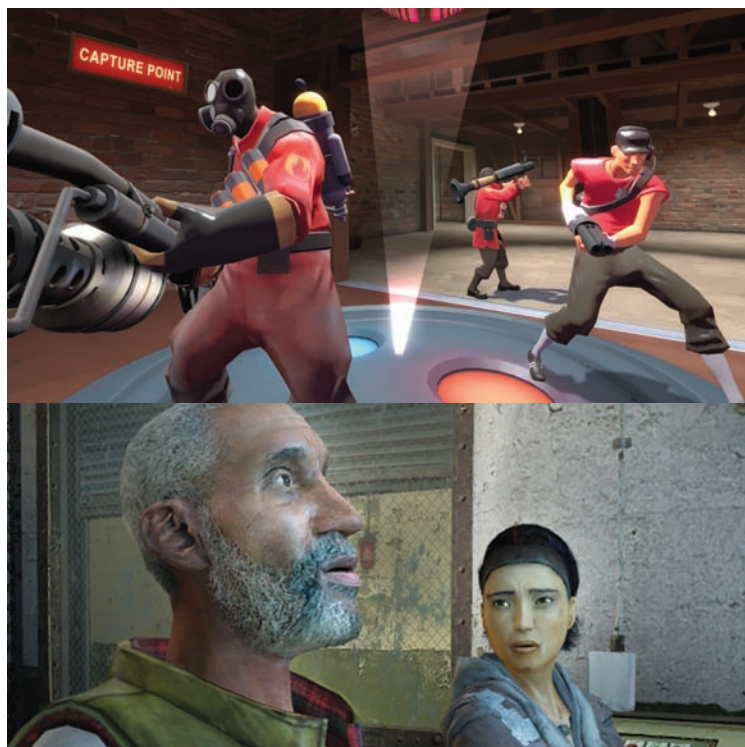
Why you should play it: Bang for the buck

The Orange Box, without question, does the video game compilation right.

Traditionally, game companies have relied on nostalgia or sheer weight of numbers to sell their compilations. Neither particularly serves the audience at hand; nostalgia hits a brick wall shortly after the novelty of a game compilation meets the reality that the good old days weren't all that good, and padding out a collection of "classics" with junk titles is a largely despicable practice.

The Orange Box contains five top-tier titles, with absolutely no filler. Most of its offerings have never seen release on consoles. It presents both an awesome single-player puzzle adventure in the space-manipulating (and hilariously goofy) Portal and a bona fide contender for online multiplayer game of the year with Team Fortress 2. The PC classic Half-Life 2 and its two stand-alone episodes are canonical works that should inspire both players and game designers alike.

Best of all, the console version for The Orange Box costs \$60. This, for the mathematically challenged, translates to a wonderful value for any game fan.



Super Mario Galaxy

Why you should play it: Because it's fun...

There's a wonderful moment in Super Mario Galaxy when the venerable plumber approaches the ledge in one of the game's introductory levels and, instead of plummeting to his doom, the game's camera flips to reveal the hero walking, briefly, upside down.

It's a clever hint of what's to come. Later stages have Mario walking horizontally across walls or inverted on ceilings. The game plays with alignment, perspective, and gravity on a whim, and shifts relentlessly between standard platforming and puzzle-based gameplay. It unabashedly tosses Mario into a bee suit, drops him into killer eel-infested waters, and rockets him into space.

It does all this with gleeful abandon and, remarkably, never compromises on fun. Super Mario Galaxy is, undoubtedly, one of the most enjoyable adventures to see release. Its sense of whimsy pervades every aspect of the game, asking a bee-suited Mario to flit across a series of brightly colored and oversized flowers to fly onto a giant bee's abdomen and, later, presenting a trek through the haunted house seen in the GameCube adventure Luigi's Mansion.

Super Mario Galaxy may be the best game released in 2007. It is unquestionably the most fun, and deserves inclusion here on that basis alone.



Manhunt 2

Why you should play it: To witness the depths of man's depravity

Mental patient Daniel Lamb clubs a man with a telephone and wraps its cord around the man's neck. Pulling and dragging his victim while the camera lingers over the scene, Lamb puts his foot on the dying man's shoulder and gives a final yank. It's perhaps one of the most explicit scenes ever shown in a video game and this appears in the *censored* version of Rockstar's *Manhunt 2*.

The uncensored version features Lamb crushing skulls with a manhole cover, using a toilet tank lid to bludgeon someone to death, and pinning an enemy to a chair with scalpels stabbed through his arms and legs.

One need not discuss morality as it applies to *Manhunt 2*; the game has none. It is instead, violence for the sake of violence and, even pruned and bowdlerized, it offers naught but the chance to use stealth to trigger a cut-scene and some gratuitous blood sprays.

Playing *Manhunt 2* is like staring into the abyss. As German philosopher F.W. Nietzsche noted, when you stare into it, the abyss stares right back.



Halo 3

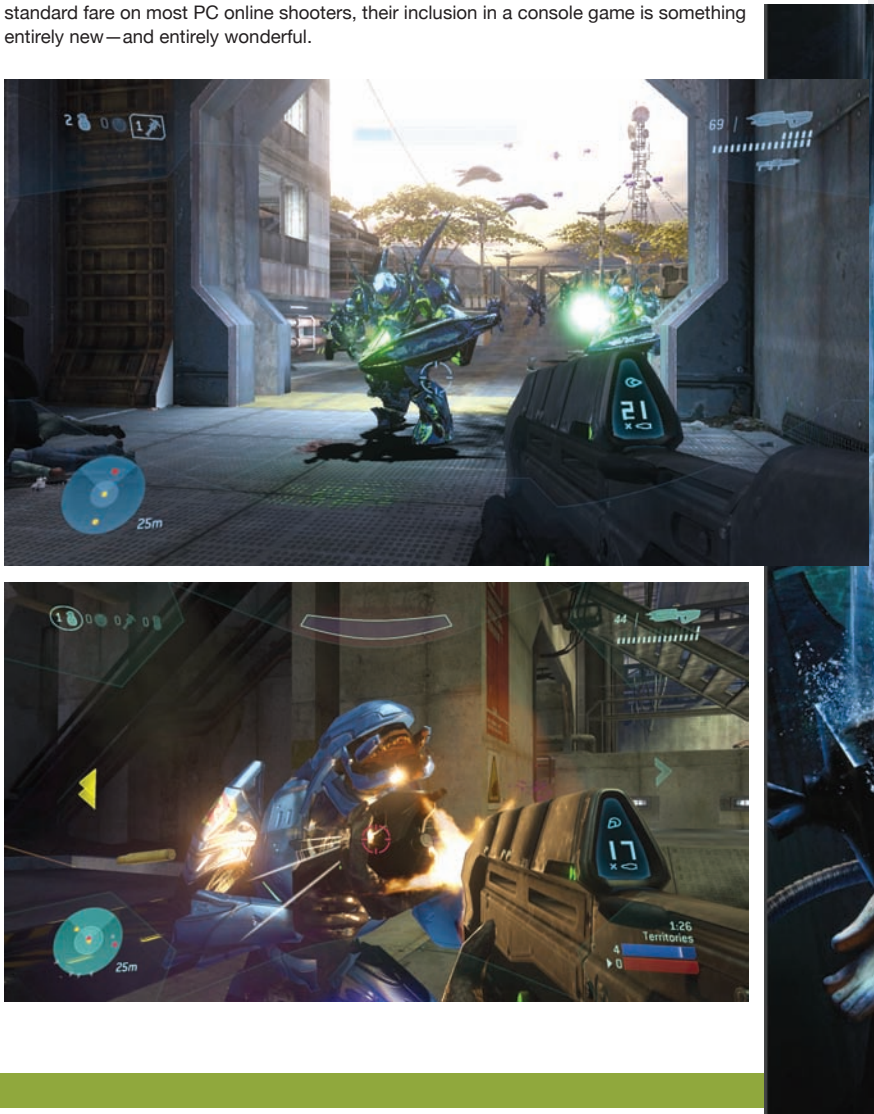
Why you should play it: For the online multiplayer

Halo 3's single-player adventure was spectacularly competent, clocking in at a light and breezy eight or so hours that didn't advance the cause of first-person shooters one iota.

Halo 3's online play is another story. Here, the game shines.

All the pieces are in place: simple controls, good weapons, fun vehicles, well-designed maps, and a host of interesting play modes. Far removed from absentee landlords, Microsoft and Bungie have taken the role of nurturing parents. Their efforts to promote the *Halo 3* online community included playing host to special events such as a 27-hour Halloween marathon of "Infection" (zombie hunting, for the uninitiated) games and a host of new downloadable maps.

What really separates *Halo 3* from other quality online console shooters as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Team Fortress 2*, though, is the inclusion of a forge mode and the ability to save and edit gameplay films. Forge is a map editor allowing for wonderful alterations to gameplay to create, for example, a game of *Halo* baseball complete with man cannon pitchers. Saved films lets players relive every battle; to study it the way a general might pore over Sun Tzu's *The Ancient Art of War*. Although these modes are standard fare on most PC online shooters, their inclusion in a console game is something entirely new—and entirely wonderful.



BioShock

Why you should play it: For the ambience...

The world of BioShock is painted in neon. Its lines are clean and orderly. Its images of happy men using plasmids to fry the bad guys conjure up images of 1950s propaganda posters.

BioShock presents the future yesterday. The gleaming underwater city of Rapture is someone's version of a 21st-century utopia as envisioned by designers in, say, the 1940s. It speaks of a wondrous future where a man can do as he pleases, free from the grubby hands of the man in Washington or the other man in Moscow.

It's a perfect playground for the shambling horrors that lurk within. The future has gone horribly wrong, and players trekking through BioShock get the opportunity to either reject this hideous future or embrace it by becoming a monster themselves.

No other game in recent memory has maintained such a consistent tone by employing common themes in architecture, design, and even lighting and sound. The juxtaposition of the game's cheery, retro-futuristic style with the decaying morality of its citizenry powers BioShock to its very end. And as the game is brilliant in the choices it presents to the player, it is even more brilliant in its use of art to convey a message. The exact word for this is brilliant.



Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Why you should play it: Because you can teach an old dog new tricks...

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare gave the Nazis a rest, and did not suffer for it.

As a general rule, developers do not prefer change. Call of Duty's creators at Infinity Ward took a big risk leaving World War II's fertile battlefields for the less well-defined world of the post-Cold War era. But in doing so, the designers took a stand against stagnation and for progress, and deserve to be lauded for it.

For its part, Call of Duty 4 is a wonderful shooter. Fully embracing its spirit of change, the game incorporates role-playing game elements into the mix, allowing players to improve their soldiers in online matches. Instead of playing an archetype, players can now customize their warriors not only with weaponry, but specific skills and abilities. It's a neat addition, and one very much fitting for a game that dared to move away from the tried and the true.



25 Snapshots from 2007

GameCock! — Best. Game. Company. Name. Ever!

God of War 2 — It's strange to think this excellent title might be overlooked on many game of the year lists because it saw release in March and not November or so.

Would you kindly?—How come Fontaine didn't ask Jack if he would kindly harvest the first little sister he met?

Playola!—Microsoft buttered up a select group of game reviewers with an \$800 bundle of free Halo 3-related goodies.

E3—Santa Monica is so much nicer than downtown Los Angeles.

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga—Is it wrong to like collecting brightly colored studs so much?

Duke Nukem Forever—It's still delayed!

Jaime Kennedy—The money Activision paid to get Jaime Kennedy to host its press event at E3 would have been better spent on goons to mercilessly beat Kennedy at its press event at E3.

Nuclear weaponry—Call of Duty teaches us that they are bad.

Peter Moore—After jumping ship to Electronic Arts, former Microsoft executive Peter "Roger" Moore picked up a Sixaxis controller at a press conference and remarked, "It's so cute!"

Xbox 360s breaking down—Redmond, we do have a problem.

Jack Thompson, buffoon—The anti-game activist will like have to wait until 2008 to find out if he's barred from practicing law in Florida. The good news: Thompson is willing to accept a 90-day suspension.

Crackdown—Hey, I can totally see my house from here.

The Meek Shall Inherit NOTHING!—Cash will buy you things. Like Pandemic Studios and BioWare.

StarCraft 2—What is the sound of 50 million South Koreans spontaneously orgasming at the same moment?

Spanish for No One—The eminently charming Spanish For Everyone for the Nintendo DS begins with a young Mexican child accidentally stealing your favorite handheld console and highailing it to Mexico.

Resident Evil 5 racist?—Nope.

Sonic and Mario—On what Bizarro world would an overfed plumber beat Sonic the hedgehog in a footrace?

Bungie breaks free—Does this mean we'll finally get to see Pimps at Sea for the Nintendo DS?

Chewbacca at E3—I have a suggestion: Let the wookiee hawk his new, slimmer PSP.

Little Big Planet—It stole the show at both the Game Developers Conference and E3.

Fable 2—Peter Molyneux's big revelation for the game? Your hero has a dog.

Fable 2—Peter Molyneux's big revelation for the game? One-button combat.

Fable 2—Microsoft to Peter Molyneux: Shut up, already!

The cake is a lie—It always is, sadly.

Speaking of cake—The most delightful tchochke handed out at the Game Developer's Conference was a miniature (and delicious) purple-frosted cake.

Burger Time—Burger King and Microsoft promoted obesity and Xbox sales with three budget titles that could be purchased with a Whopper. Sneak King, Big Bumpin', and Pocket Bike Racer sold more than 3.2 million copies and instigated 532,000 gases of gastrointestinal distress.

From the horse's mouth—"I think we are seeing progress in Japan."—Peter Moore on Xbox 360 sales.

From the horse's mouth, part II—"Any trend to produce programs and products—including animated films and video games—which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behavior or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion."—Pope Benedict XVI

BloodRayne the Motion Picture—Not only was the film a commercial and critical bomb, but it wasn't even good—er, bad—enough to win the worst picture award at the 2007 Razzie Award festival. Oh, cruel fate.

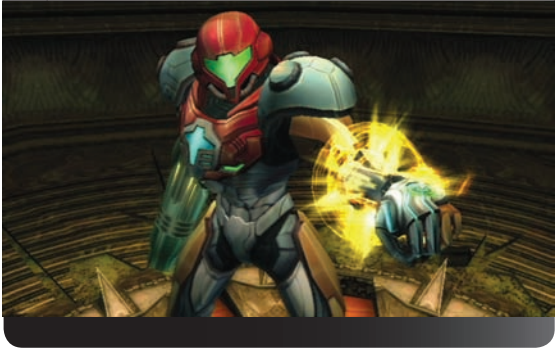
Goodbye, Phoenix Wright—The quirky ace attorney has starred in his last Nintendo DS adventure.

Top five game consoles:

01	Xbox 360
02	Nintendo Wii
03	Nintendo DS
04	PlayStation 3
05	PSP

Top Five Games Where You Shoot Stuff

01	BioShock (multiplatform)
02	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (multiplatform)
03	The Orange Box (multiplatform)
04	Metroid Prime 3: Corruption (Wii)
05	Halo 3 (Xbox 360)



Top Five Biggest Clichés in Video Gaming

01	Explosive barrels
02	Monsters that hoard treasure
03	The spiky-haired, vaguely androgynous, and plucky male hero
04	Aim for the head!
05	Meat = health

Five Games We Should All Be Playing This Year But Aren't, Thank You Very Much

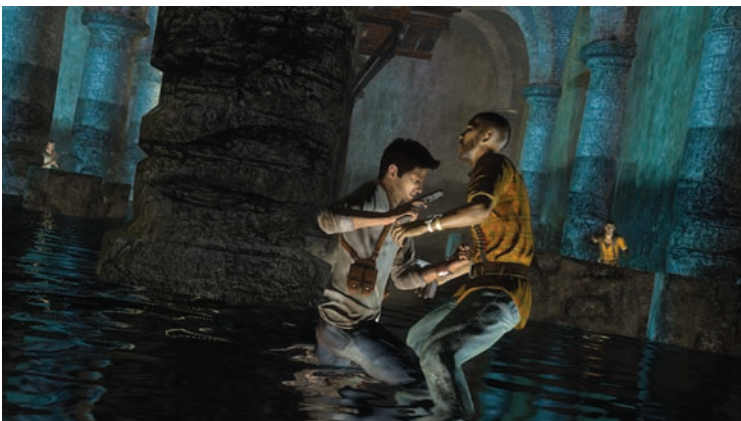
01	Spore
02	Metal Gear Solid IV: Guns of the Patriots
03	Super Smash Brothers: Brawl
04	Grand Theft Auto IV
05	Duke Nukem Forever

My Top 5 Games of 2007

In No Apparent Order

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

If any PS3 exclusive had the potential to be a Gears of War-style megahit, it was this one. Uncharted has great shooting, great platforming, great writing, and absolutely stunning graphics. Who wouldn't love an exceptionally well-done Indiana Jones-style adventure romp? Absolutely no one, that's who; everyone who has played Uncharted seems to love it. But while it may be the best reason to own a PS3, most actual PS3 owners seem to prefer buying inferior versions of multi-platform 3rd-party titles. What the hell? Buy this game, you jerks! If I don't get a full Uncharted trilogy I'm holding all of you responsible.



BioShock

Publishers adhere to established genres, settings, and storylines so tightly that sometimes we forget how unlimited the storytelling possibilities of games really are. After a steady diet of World War II, alien-blasting and Tolkien-esque hack-and-slashery, BioShock's art-deco visuals and wildly original backstory completely blew my mind. I had issues with some of its game mechanics and its hollow black-or-white system of morality, but such quibbles are forgotten whenever I fire it up and lose myself in its brilliantly realized world. I've been playing games for almost 20 years now, and I can't remember the last time a video game took me someplace so totally new and different.



Blue Dragon

I still can't get over the unfair critical drubbing Blue Dragon got from many members of the western press. So what if it didn't drastically improve upon the mechanics of last-gen RPGs? Plenty of first-person shooters score 9s and 10s by building off the ideas of their predecessors, and that's exactly what Blue Dragon did, mixing many of the best elements of the Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest series with a few new twists, a great soundtrack and beautiful next-gen environments. I only wish it had more competition; as a fan of Japanese RPGs, I must admit that Blue Dragon gets an unfair boost from being the only next-gen game in town. (Sorry, Eternal Sonata; you gave it a good try.)



The Orange Box

I was actually disappointed by a lot of the games in this heavily hyped collection... Half-Life 2 is pretty fun, but the highest-rated game ever on PC?! Really? Portal? It was clever, sure, but hardly brilliant. And Team Fortress 2? Yeah, it would have been nice if that had actually worked within a month of the game's release. And yet, put a whole lot of pretty-good in one box, and it magically becomes something great. Giving the Orange Box a top spot feels like giving an Academy Award to a slightly flawed film just because everyone who bought a ticket got free popcorn, soda, and a handjob while they watched, but... What can I say? Valve bought my love. No other game gave me this much.



Super Mario Galaxy

At first I was disappointed to see Super Mario Galaxy jettison the free exploration aspects of Mario 64. But then I got over it. Galaxy may be more of a stage-clear action-platformer than an adventure title, but it offers such a huge and varied assortment of levels that it justified its price ten times over. With so many intense gaming experiences coming at the end of the year, it's nice to see a game you can play—and make meaningful progress at—in short bursts. And the two-player mode is a wonderful way to include a child or casual-gamer spouse in your gaming obsession, without having to endure some weak-ass "party" game.



Honorable Mentions

The First Five Hours of Assassin's Creed

The early hours of Assassin's Creed were among the most impressive gaming experiences of the year. Too bad the later ones were among the most boring. Assassin's Creed claims the prize for most fun and innovative control scheme and gives Uncharted some competition in the best-graphics category, but its actual game mechanics were too thin to earn it a top slot.

Etrian Odyssey

I've been playing it off and on for nine months now, and I'm still not even close to done with Etrian Odyssey. I can't quite place my finger on why I keep coming back to it; if it were merely its old-school charm, that novelty would have faded long ago. There's something deep and fundamentally satisfying in its game design, and I can't wait to see how they build off of that for its upcoming sequel.

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption

Metroid Prime 3 was a great game that couldn't quite top the many other fantastic first-person adventure/shooters of 2007. I loved its Wiimote aiming, its exceptional boss design and its eerie alien worlds... But with only subtle visual upgrades and little in the way of new items and play mechanics, it just didn't feel new enough to make a game-of-the-year level impact.

Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords

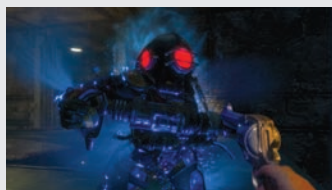
This stupidly addictive RPG/puzzle-game hybrid cost me more sleep than any other game this year. Now that it's on my Xbox 360 hard drive, I often attempt to play a quest or two to mellow out after a grueling evening of playing the FPS-du-jour, and the next thing I know it's 5:30 am. Goddamn it.

Five Encouraging Industry Trends in 2007

I am by nature a bitter man, prone to long rants about how Brain Training is a fraud, Rockstar Games is killing the industry, and all of my favorite Japanese developers are sinking into irrelevance. But I must admit: there's a lot to be optimistic about as we turn the corner to 2008. Here are five trends that I may have trouble whining about in the future:

1. Actual Adult Content in Console Games

The English language has been tripping over the dual meanings of "adult content" for years, so let me be clear what I'm talking about here. I am not talking about Manhunt 2, which is only adult in the sense that it's inappropriate for children. The definition of adult that's near and dear to my heart is the one that precedes it in the dictionary: "emotionally and mentally mature." The video game industry has finally figured out that its primary audience is no longer children, spawning a wave of games aimed not for the lowest-common denominator, but for intelligent, discriminating adults. BioShock's philosophical underpinnings made me feel like I was in college again (in a good way). Portal had a sense of humor that was far more highbrow than what previously passed as "comic relief" (ie, fart jokes in Conker games), and Mass Effect dabbled in adult romantic relationships that included—gasp—sex. Even Assassin's Creed—a game actually about murdering people—took the high road, using no more violence than necessary and delighting the historian within me with its surprisingly authentic Crusades-era setting. There was really no reason for any of those games to be restricted to adult audiences, since they were no more explicit than PG-13 movies, but at least they managed to live up to the "M" on their boxes by being emotionally and artistically mature.



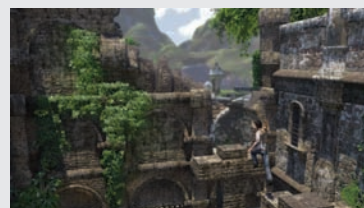
2. Japanese Games No Longer Slipping Through the Cracks

With a rise in the number of good localization companies and a decline in Japan's total output of marketable games, virtually every decent title released in Japan is making its way to the U.S. There are still a few hold-outs: Namco Bandai continues to deny us iDOLM@STER and most of the good handheld Tales games, and Falcom has yet to seal a deal to bring over the excellent PSP Sora no Kiseki series, but it's hard to complain about much else. Indeed, I had to scrap my personal "Top Japanese Games That Demand a US Release" list when half of the titles I was pleading for were actually announced before my submission deadline. (Specifically XSEED's announcement of a Wild Arms Crossfire release and Square Enix's announcement that Subarashiki Kono

Sekai/It's a Wonderful World would be released with the US title of "The World Ends With You.")

3. Platformers Where You Never Actually Fall

Okay, it's a stretch to call it a trend when I'm really talking about just two games, but I'm doing it anyway, because I love what Uncharted and Assassin's Creed have done with jumping. Both games make you feel like a total badass when you're leaping from ledge to ledge or diving from a tower to a hay cart, but neither requires strict precision. Gone are the days when you have to time a button tap at the exact moment your character's heel makes contact with the edge of the ledge, or you have to adjust the camera *juuuust* right so you can leap towards a distant landing spot in a cardinal direction. Instead, both games figure out what you want to do and make it happen without being dicks about it. They clearly want you to succeed, and while you'd think platforming would lose something when there's less of a threat of death, you'd be wrong. It's better this way. Let's never go back.



4. Downloadable Games Worth Getting Excited About

This generation began with a great deal of pessimism about how making a marketable next-gen title would cost tens of millions of dollars, stifling risk-taking among developers and ending the romantic era of small teams crafting games in their garage. But thanks to Xbox Live Arcade and Playstation Marketplace, small-scale game development is now stronger than ever. Everyday Shooter has proven that one guy can still make a great game, amateur-developed efforts like Aegis Wing have shown the service's potential as a training ground for new developers, and the cheap development costs have resurrected genres thought to have died in the 16-bit era, like Omega Five's side-scrolling character shooter.



5. Non-Games And Real Games Co-Existing Peacefully

The phenomenal sales success of the Wii and DS had me a little rattled at the beginning of the year. With Nintendo treating enthusiast gamers as an afterthought and 3rd parties abuzz with plans to dumb down their franchise titles for a new casual generation, I feared that America might be going the way of Japan, where long-running hardcore franchises are charting record-low sales, buried by Brain Training, Mario Party, and Nintendogs. While it does sicken me to see Americans actually buying the horrible Mario Party 8, the limited successes of casual games in America still pales in comparison to the continued strength of serious-gamer franchises like Halo, Zelda, and Call of Duty, and even original hardcore titles like Assassin's Creed, Mass Effect and BioShock. Even Nintendo hasn't let me down; they've done a pretty good job of making games like Super Mario Galaxy and Phantom Hourglass casual-friendly in ways that haven't alienated old-school fans. Hardcore is still king—in the west, at least.



Five Things Western Developers Still Suck At

Just a few years ago, western developers were lucky to land a token award or two in our year-end wrap-ups. Now the tables have turned completely, and while I begrudgingly welcome our new North American and European game-development overlords, I still can't help but point out the many areas in which they've failed me.

1. Character Design

Western developers have always had trouble making decent characters, and this is the year it officially became ridiculous. Virtually every game features either husky-voiced, super-buff space marines from the Marcus Fenix mold or average-Joe composites like Half-Life's Gordon Freeman, Mass Effect's default Sheppard or Uncharted's Drake. I'm sure this is what market research tells developers that the public will respond to, but that's what they're telling to every other developer too. As a result, the west's video-game hero output is an endless sea of rippling biceps and forgettable faces. Why can't we craft the sort of intriguing, unconventional heroes who can carry a series, like Dante, Link, or Solid Snake?

Notable exceptions: Ubisoft Montreal hit it out of the park with Assassin's Creed's Altair, one of the best-designed protagonists to ever come from the west. His distinctive costume, hooded eyes, lithe build, and eagle-shaped silhouette gave him an air of mystery that swept millions of gamers in. Props also go to Ninja Theory, who played Nariko for more than just sex appeal, and who score supporting-character-of-the-year honors for the distinctively cute and amusingly demented Kai.



2. Game Music

Don't get me wrong—the west has some great composers. Too bad they're only hired to make 40 minutes of music for 20-hour games. Instead we get lame ambient sound effects and maybe some far-off tribal drumbeats for 95% of the game, with real music that only kicks in during the most intense moments, when you can't really pay attention to it anyway. Maybe constant BGM would be out of place in Call of Duty 4, but there's no reason games like Uncharted, BioShock, and Assassin's Creed shouldn't have some good music playing during the slower moments of the game. Maybe the composers think they're ramping up the tension with their water-drips and bird chirps and whatnot, but all they're doing is sending me reaching for the radio. Japanese composers can handle an entire game, and they work cheap, so how about giving them a call?

Notable exceptions: Lair had a spectacular soundtrack from start to finish, and the developers of Heavenly Sword and God of War certainly understand the valuable role of upbeat, atmospheric music in an action game.

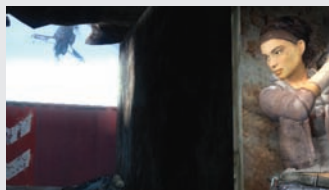
3. Proper Handling of Event Scenes

I have nothing against a well-done event scene, provided they follow the internationally accepted conventions of event-scene design, as listed below:

- All event scenes must be skippable. No exceptions.
- Two characters merely conversing is not an acceptable event. There must be scene changes, fighting, plot twists, and/or explosions.
- This God of War/Shenmue button-mashing bullshit is banned forever.
- Continue checkpoints come AFTER event scenes, not before.

Virtually all of Japan's developers have agreed to these rules, but America still has plenty of hold-outs. Assassin's Creed manages to violate every section of the convention (which is typical of Ubisoft), while God of War 2 and Heavenly Sword thumbed their noses at article 3, seemingly unaware that experiment is over now.

Notable exceptions: The Call of Duty series has reversed its tradition of event-



scene crimes by eliminating all but a few beautifully done interactive events like its famous opening-credits car ride. The Darkness has also done some great work with interactive events, and in grand Valve tradition, the games in The Orange Box skillfully tell their entire stories through gameplay alone.

4. Menu Design

A strange obsession with menu and interface ergonomics has been sweeping Japan lately, a trend that peaked with the Menu Director of Crisis Core landing one of the first spots in the game's opening credits. (And deservedly so; the game's menus were attractive, clear, and intuitive.) But in the west, it's pretty clear that game menus

are still tacked on at the last minute, with typically disastrous consequences. I've played Oblivion for 50 hours and still can't find anything in its mess of a menu system, and Assassin's Creed buries its inventory list so far in its menus that most people aren't even aware it exists. Mass Effect's menus are as ugly as they are unusable, and trying to make sense of Kratos' abilities from the God of War menu screens is way more challenging than it needs to be. Can we start putting some effort into this aspect of games, please?

Notable exceptions: Can't think of a single one.

5. Quirkiness

Quirkiness is hard to define, but it's pretty clear that Japan has it, and we don't. Japan is constantly churning out low-budget games like E.D.F., Chibi-Robo, and Operation Darkness that are so charming and weird that we're willing to forgive their many obvious flaws. But when the west makes low-budget games, they typically just suck. What's the American equivalent to quirky, experimental series like LocoRoco, Katamari Damacy, Wario Ware, and Animal Crossing? Junk like MySims, Ninjabread Man, and Playground Games, I guess? Does anyone actually like the tacky characters in Guitar Hero as much as they like the ones in Japanese music games like Parappa or Elite Beat Agents? Why can't westerners cook up good quirk?



Notable exceptions: Quirky western games do pop up from time to time on XBLA and PSN. Alien Hominid is a delight, and whatever fIOW is, it's certainly quirky. Dead Head Fred and Crush on the PSP both had a nice quirky aftertaste, but we're still light years behind in this field.

Just to be fair Ten Things Japanese Developers Suck at

1. Online play
2. Releasing a decent game within a year of a hardware launch
3. Refraining from whoring their franchises to death with multiple yearly releases
4. Making and distributing middleware
5. Adding hard modes to their easy-ass games
6. Allowing you to make meaningful story choices in RPGs and adventure games
7. Distributing Xbox Live achievements
8. Developing new intellectual property
9. Dialogue trees
10. Copying the many things that only Capcom does right

The Top Five “Holy F---!” Moments of 2007

This hardware cycle was more than a year old at the start of 2007, but the second generation of 360 games and the first truly polished PS3 releases raised the bar so much that most of 2006's games already look antiquated in comparison. Here are five moments that made the graphics whore within me sing:

1. Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

Uncharted is easily the artistic triumph of the year, and stumbling upon this stranded U-Boat was the first of its many “Wow!” moments. I wish we could have captured all of this area's majesty in a single screenshot.

2. Assassin's Creed

Assassin's Creed wows you from the start, but over the first hour or so, it just keeps getting prettier and prettier. Turning the corner to see Damascus in the distance was one of the year's visual highlights.

3. BioShock

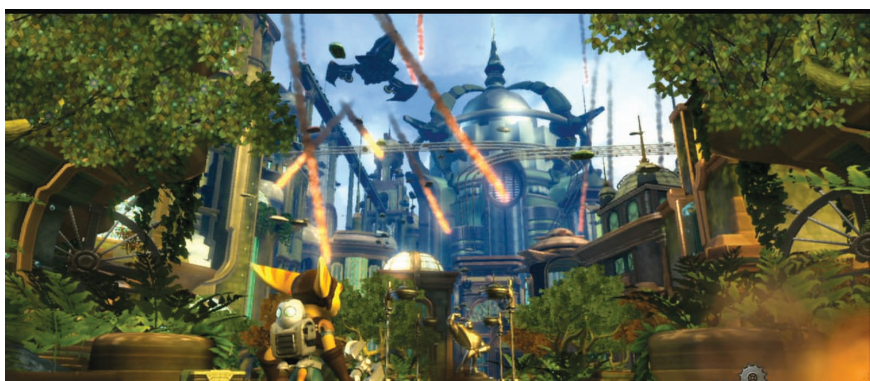
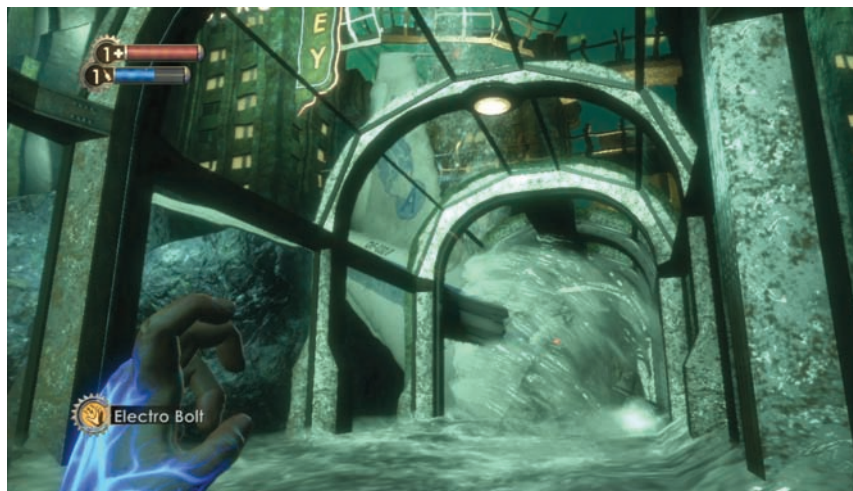
Had he witnessed the BioShock moment where the wreckage of the hero's plane crashes into an underwater tube, complete with flapping fish, gradually cracking glass and luggage sinking in the distance, even the Pope might have dropped the F-bomb.

4. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

War games so often bury their technically impressive environments under the dusty, sepia hues that everyone associates with war movies. But the developers of Call of Duty 4 found the beauty in war, setting off gritty battlefields with a splash of purple twilight or the warm glow of burning wreckage.

5. Ratchet & Clank Future

CoD4's offset colors are nice, but it's great to see some balls-out fantasy color from time to time too. Ratchet puts its best graphical foot forward the moment you press start.



2007 Mobile Top 10



01

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

NDS / Nintendo

The ultimate in stylus play made Phantom Hourglass the ultimate adventure of the year.



04

Castlevania the Dracula X Chronicles

PSP / Konami

Redone Rondo of Blood and remastered Symphony of the Night in one glorious package.



02

Ratchet & Clank Size Matters

PSP / High Impact / SCEA

Apparently size didn't matter when it came to packing a console-size adventure into the PSP.



03

Jeanne d' Arc

PSP / Level 5 / SCEA

15th Century France came to the PSP this year in Level 5's epic strategy/RPG that crossed swords with fantasy and historical events.

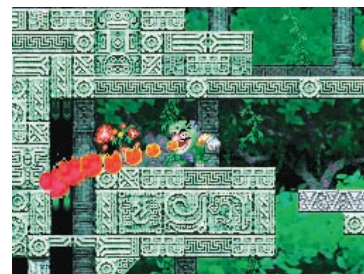


05

Wario Master of Disguise

NDS / Nintendo

You can't keep an evil bulbous scoundrel down, especially when he's a master of disguise!

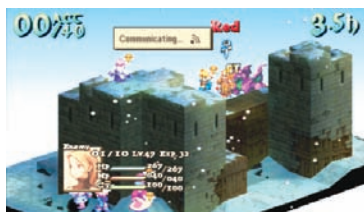


06

Contra 4

NDS / WayForward / Konami

WayForward reinvisioned classic Contra gameplay for the next mobile generation.



09

Final Fantasy Tactics: War of the Lions

PSP / Square Enix

Deep gameplay and rich story telling made War of Lions the second best PSP RPG of 2007.



07

Brave Story

PSP / Game Republic Inc. / XSEED

Beautiful console role playing in a portable package—but you wouldn't know by looking at it.



10

Crash of the Titans

NDS / AMAZE / Sierra

The sleeper DS game of the year; Crash of the Titans rode high and mighty on DS.

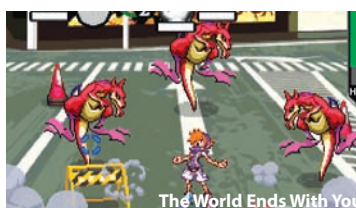


08

Lunar Knights

NDS / Kojima prod. / Konami

Kojima productions finally invited us inside to play by the moon and the sun. They even threw in a wicked 3D shooter!

**Top 5 Most Wanted 2008**

Crisis Core

01 Crisis Core

PSP / Square Enix

The greatest PSP game ever made?

02 God of War Chains of Olympus

PSP / Ready At Dawn / SCEA

It's God of War...on PSP by the people who brought us Dexter. Killer app supreme.

03 The World Ends With You

NDS / Square Enix

Formerly known as "It's a Wonderful World," we're just happy this thoroughly amazing DS game is being localized. It was touch and go there for awhile. Go Square Enix!

04 Patapon

PSP / SCEI / SCEA

You can stop playing LocoRoco now; Patapon is calling...soon.

05 FF Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates

NDS / Square Enix

The wait is nearly over. Now we can start waiting for the Wii game.

History shall record that the PC was a very strong gaming platform in 2007. Coming off a year of multiple console introductions, PC gaming held its ground with a hard drive full of compelling exclusives such as *Crysis* and *The Witcher*, and excellent versions of multiplatform hits like the long-awaited *Gears of War* for Windows. Thanks to plummeting prices on dual core CPUs and the introduction of superb cost vs. performance video cards, more computer game players (including many of the 9+ million still entrenched in *World of Warcraft*) were able to enjoy the finer details of the latest powerhouse PC titles. And with the aforementioned *Crysis*, the PC dutifully fulfilled its high technology role, crushing all other graphical giants—no matter the platform—into little bits of charred bamboo.



Year in Review The Best of PC

BEST PC GAME OF THE YEAR

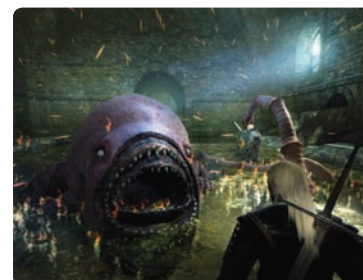
Crysis

crytek / ea

Usually a developer's attitude and culture starts right at the top, and anyone that has heard Crytek's Cevat Yerli speak of his company knows that this is a firm driven by uncompromising ambition. This "Maximum Game" axiom led to the creation of *Crysis*, our pick for 2007's best PC title. Though *Crysis* bumped shoulders with other top-tier titles in a very active first-person shooter genre, its hugely satisfying nanosuit-enhanced gameplay and unprecedented graphical lushness (CryEngine 2 is a beast) could not be denied.

To witness the prettiest island combat versus North Korean and alien foes, this feat of German engineering begs to be played on high settings and that requires a rather monstrous PC. Hardware vendors must love this game. Technical merits aside, anyone with the slightest interest in awe-inspiring action games needs to spend time here. Each level in *Crysis* is a vast, cunningly constructed sandbox for that richly modeled nanosuit to play in. Evoking a sense of "I am the Predator, this is my jungle and they are my prey" like no other FPS has managed, the suit's booming fisticuffs, cloaking, sprinting and leaping produced a truly varied campaign laced with self-made pacing through environments so reactive, they should—but don't—require a PhysX card. If Crytek manages to assemble a console version of *Crysis*, it'll be a miracle. One you absolutely must play.

Runners-Up: *BioShock*, *Call of Duty 4*



BEST PC RPG

The Witcher

cd projekt / atari

It's hard to describe *The Witcher* as a feel-good story, what with its violent medieval world and grim monster-slaying protagonist Geralt, but that's exactly what it is. Our top RPG on PC proves that a strong engine, a lot of passion, and a great story can overcome adversities like obscurity. Who knew that a cult East European fantasy property developed by new kid on the block CD Projekt Red would produce a great traditional RPG? They knew. Now we all know.

Runner-Up: *Titan Quest: Immortal Throne*

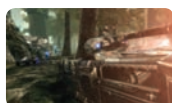
BEST PC MULTIPAYER

Team Fortress 2

valve / ea

At the time of this writing, literally thousands of *Team Fortress 2* servers are actively being played, so it would seem that TF 2's brilliant multiplayer execution has a few fans. Flanked by a wonderful art style and superb animation, TF 2 is one of the few multiplayer-only action titles with an unforgettable cast and fantastic core play mechanics.

Runners-Up: *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, *Unreal Tournament 3*



BEST SOUND DESIGN

Call of Duty 4

infinity ward / activation

BEST PC RPG

Portal

valve / ea

BEST MUSIC

The Witcher

cd projekt / atari



BEST ONLINE RPG

Tabula Rasa

destination games / ncsoft

From the early battlefields of the Divide to the Foreus Plateau, Richard Garriott's Tabula Rasa presents a compelling moral/political sci-fi yarn sprinkled with just enough clever hybrid gameplay to escape the clutches of the MMO cookie cutter. TR's instances are well written, its world designs are thoughtful, and the cloning concept provides for highly rewarding class experimentation.

Runner-Up: Lord of the Rings Online



BEST ATMOSPHERE

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.

gsc gameworld / thq

Rarely does a first-person shooter require upwards of four years to develop, but such is the case with GSC Gameworld's S.T.A.L.K.E.R. And while its X-Ray engine may have aged slightly in that time, no other PC title demonstrated the raw, palpable atmosphere and creep-out of S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s artfully conceived exclusion zones.



BEST ENGINE

Call of Duty 4

infinity ward / activision

While Crysis is 2007's showcase game when it comes to the most forward-looking technology, Infinity Ward's fantastic Call of Duty 4 engine takes this category thanks to its wonderfully optimized performance at even the highest detail settings. Few titles push for 60 frames per second with this much action and next-gen detail, but CoD 4's masterfully scripted and sculpted modern warfare chooses all the right nips and tucks to lock down silky smooth FPS alongside lovely image quality and huge effects.



"CoD 4's masterfully scripted and sculpted modern warfare chooses all the right nips and tucks to lock down silky smooth FPS."

BEST IMPROVED PC GAMING SERVICE

Valve's Steam

Let's face it, since Steam's inception 5 years ago, Valve's digital download and online gaming hub has always had its detractors. In 2007, the haters suddenly ran out of ammo. Valve cleaned-up its Steam client and integrated Steam Community, useful Live-like multiplayer features that can be accessed in-game. Hand-in-hand with these client and multiplayer enhancements, it was impossible to overlook Steam's remarkably robust game line-up. Anchored by the Orange Box and dozens of cult hits and mainstream giants from top publishers, Steam now holds a sizeable portion of history's finest PC games.



BEST PC GAMING PERIPHERAL

Microsoft Sidewinder Mouse

It's a big one, and it's strictly for Righties, but you'll find no better all-purpose gaming mouse than Microsoft's Sidewinder. It has a superfast laser engine, generous pinky-catching skirt, and superb button feel. The metal mousewheel is brilliant for stuff like cycling through nanosuit powers in Crysis. The included kit, while a tad gimmicky, includes a great cord anchor. Dear MS Hardware: for the next Sidewinder, how about two or three large mouse feet (strips) instead of five circular contacts? It is a path to greatness.

BEST REAL-TIME STRATEGY

World in Conflict

massive / sierra

BEST RACING

Trackmania United

nadeo / focus home

BEST ADVENTURE

Sam & Max: Ice Station Santa

telltale games

BEST GRAPHICS TECHNICAL

Crysis

crytek / ea

BEST GRAPHICS ARTISTIC

Team Fortress 2

valve / ea

BEST PC HARDWARE

Nvidia GeForce 8800 GT





ask alienware

no. 019 // february 2008

In our February edition we run the gamut from motherboard and Vista advice to environmental friendliness and your PC's power consumption. We also lay-out the specifics on burning to Blu-ray and gearing up for indie development.

q. I'm going to be building or buying a new PC early in the new year, and I'd like some advice on motherboards. What type of mobo is a "safe bet" nowadays for gamers, and what are the newest motherboard features I should really be looking for?
Vance, CO.



Alienware: Nvidia's 680i motherboard is a very safe bet along with Intel's X38 motherboard. A couple of new features you should definitely look for are support for PCI 2.0, DDR3 memory, and 3-Way graphics card support.

q. Let's face it, Windows Vista isn't catching on as well as Microsoft had hoped. Vista is getting bashed in TV commercials and even the hardcore community is reverting to XP as most DX 10 games are simply too demanding. Heck, with a few tweaks to the game's config file, you can run Crysis in DX 9 mode with most of the DX 10 visuals, but faster! Do you guys think that Vista will ever catch on?
Ron, PA.

Alienware: Vista has many added features that benefit the consumer. Since Vista is so feature-filled there were a few bugs that were encountered at the launch as Vista. These bugs happen with the launch of any new software or operating system. Microsoft has traditionally done a great job of addressing all bugs with the releases of service packs and we fully expect them to come through again when a service pack is released.



q. As a big computer builder, what sort of effort does Alienware put into being green and environmentally responsible? I saw a recent Greenpeace report on electronics and how some manufacturers are a lot more responsible than others when it comes to toxic policies and recycling efforts.
Brian, CT.

Alienware: Rest assured that all Alienware products are 100% ROHS compliant and are also totally lead free.



q. I have a relatively new laptop, not cutting edge, but it runs WoW and Guild Wars nicely for me and managed Call of Duty 4 recently. If I wanted to output this older laptop's video to a HDTV, would I bet better off with a 720p display instead of a full 1080p? My thinking is that I could manage nicer frame rates and a little anti-aliasing if all I had to hit was 720p...
Charles, NY.



Alienware: Your best bet is to start at a 720p resolution and go from there to find a balance between performance and quality that you are comfortable with. You need to keep in mind that the higher the resolution you go the more hardware demanding the game becomes. But if you have the money, picking up a 1080p HDTV is never a bad decision. You future proof yourself if you ever want to use it for 1080p HD applications, an example being Blu-ray.

q. What is the maximum amount of raw data a Blu-ray can hold? Also, I was wondering what program I would need to burn Blu-ray back-ups, and if Blu-rays take longer to burn than other types of discs. Also, do they degrade faster than DVDs and would you recommend them for archival purposes? Do your new laptops include BD burners?
Matt, CA.



Alienware: For now the maximum amount of information a Blu-ray can hold is 50GB (dual Layer) but that is before compression software! You can burn Blu-ray backups with Nero which is included on Alienware Systems. Blu-rays do take longer to burn because the speed of the drives are lower at the moment, but they are increasing with time as all the other drive formats did. For archiving you would want space, so Blu-ray would probably be the best bet but if you want reliability, perhaps go with DVDs because the drives are more accessible for the time being. Alienware notebooks are indeed available with Blu-ray Burners.

"For archiving you would want space, so Blu-ray would probably be the best bet..."

q. If I wanted to get into indie game development, do I need to invest in a really powerful PC these days, or could I start a little less expensive and still have enough power to run the kind of tools and libraries—like XNA studio—that I'll need?
Curtis, TO.



Alienware: I would always aim high. The better the system, the less issues with performance. Do not sell yourself short unless you have no other choice. Also be selective about your upgrades. If you do a lot of multi-tasking go with dual or quad core CPUs and lots of memory dedicated to a really heavy duty graphics card, which you would need for hardcore gaming... maybe for the games you will produce?



Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest new products.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bitrates and firewalls, send them along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free 1-year subscription, so don't be shy!

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Conquering the Burning Sea

We have the last word with Flying Lab Software's content director Jess Lebow as he and his mateys prepare to launch *Pirates of the Burning Sea* in late January on SOE's Station label. Could this be the pirate-themed online world you've been waiting for? Allow Jess to entice and educate before you climb aboard.



Interview

Jess Lebow, Flying Lab Software

play: The world's most popular MMO titles invest major content efforts into player vs. environment, player vs. player, and various brands of guild challenges. How does *Pirates of the Burning Sea* address each of these prized elements of the genre?

Jess Lebow: Well, for PVE, we've created over 1000 missions for each nation (Britain, France, Spain and Pirates). In every friendly port you'll find missions to run, stories to play through, and conflicts to conquer. It's a very rich, deep world. But perhaps even more involved is our PVP system. At the highest level, each nation will compete to take over the entire Caribbean. PVP doesn't exist natively in the game; players actually have to create their own war zones. They do this by sinking enemy NPC ships, or by supplying the local rebels with guns and ammunition, or by dumping cheap economic goods into a port to destabilize the economy. It's great because there is no PVP ghetto. It's front

and center, and the players control where the combat takes place and whether or not they want to participate.

And we'll be introducing the first of our guild-style raid content shortly after launch—super challenging, high reward, repeatable content that will require a lot of team coordination. We expect to roll out a ton of this style of content in the months following our release.

This was a wild and unruly time in the Caribbean. How many of the ports are safe, and how many can be conquered by player factions?

Almost all of the over 80 ports in the game can be conquered. When an enemy nation has created enough unrest in that location, then a final battle takes place between the [conflicting nations]. These battles are epic affairs—25 ships on each side. Forts firing cannons, boarding actions, swashbuckling sword combat, overrunning battlements...



when the dust clears, to the victor goes the port.

Hear hear. Will your players be able to assemble and build vast collections of booty?

Of course. Clothing is a big one. As you move through your career you will unlock new clothing items that you can change into on a whim. As an example, naval officers can collect more elaborate uniform options as they go up in rank. There are tailor shops in key ports where you can go to change the appearance of your character. You can change anything from your boots to your hat and everything in between. And we have shoulder parrots too! In addition, there are swords, pistols, and other equipment to be had, and there are nine upgrade slots on each ship.

Ships are a major part of the game. The entire economy is player driven. You can make everything from cannonballs to hulls, sails and full ships. Almost anything you can think of can be improved on. As players level up they will gain access to larger, ever more elaborate ships.

What kind of community support can players look forward to as *Pirates of the Burning Sea* goes live in January?

Already there are several fan and guild sites that have started to provide content for players. Someone even put together an interactive map of our game world. Just like Google maps, you can zoom in and out and click on individual ports to

get in-depth information. Eventually you're going to see real-time updates about the status of the game world—who's leading the fight to control the Caribbean, which of your listings on the auction house have sold, etc.

SOE's support and experience will be helpful. Have your post-release content plans become more elaborate than expected?

At this point we've far exceeded the initial vision. Moving forward, I think you're going to see us be more aggressive and more grandiose in our designs. We know what we're capable of, and we like to push the boundaries. Shipping the game isn't going to slow us down. In fact, it's more like starting a new project. The first stage of *Pirates* is complete. The next stage has begun. As far as we're concerned, the sky is the limit.

Thanks Jess, and good luck.



"It's great because there is no PVP ghetto. It's front and center, and the players control where the combat takes place..."

Jess Lebow, Flying Lab Software

Al-Revis Academy, where your alchemic future begins

Mana Khemia™ - Revis Times

Alchemists of Al-Revis

www.ManaKhemia.com

New Curriculum Starts March 2008!

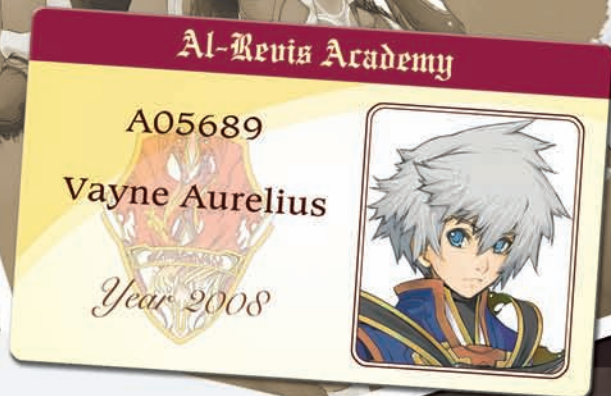
Notable student, Flay Gunnar had this to say to all the new students arriving to Al-Revis Academy: "The teachers are excited to introduce an all-new curriculum for Spring 2008. So, you can come and learn all kinds of new skills in the classroom, or you can join me on the quad in my never ending fight for justice."

Al-Revis Academy offers the widest range of combat courses to develop personal strengths.

Al-Revis celebrates racial diversity of every kind. Discover cultures from around the world and beyond.

Work with your personal assistants for your alchemic research.

Here is another



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PlayStation®2





Brutal Legend

double fine / sierra

ps3, xbox 360

Take to the demon-filled landscape as Heavy Metal roadie Eddie Riggs after his mystical belt buckle (forged from the metal flesh of the fire beast!) transports him into a Nordic-meets-Metal (head on)-inspired alternate history where demons have enslaved humanity. Revel in the glory of Double Fine's second offering as you sing praise to the Metal Gods.

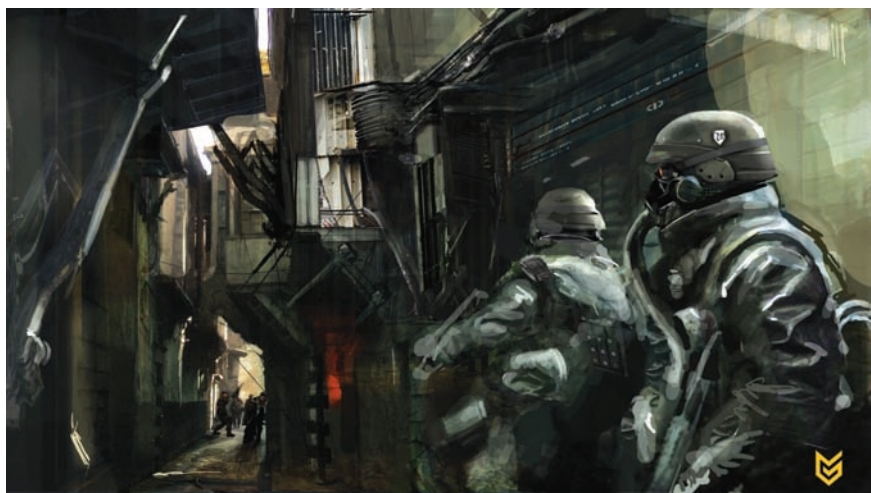


Just Cause 2

avalanche studios / eidos

ps3, xbox 360

Redesigned for his next-generation debut, Rico Rodriguez is back in Avalanche Studio's Just Cause 2—the sandbox game to make all other sandbox games run home with their tail between their legs. The game is new and improved in every way, with more of everything gamers loved, and none of what they didn't.

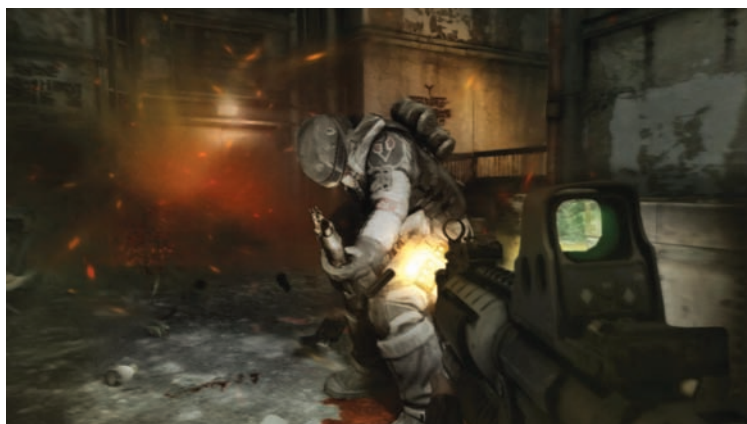


Killzone 2

guerrilla games / scea

ps3

Does the world really need another dreary the-world-is-ending first-person shooter? Of course it does, as long as it looks as good as Killzone 2! Still no word if the game, well, you know, plays any good, and, well, you know, just how accurate these screen shots will turn out when the game is moving for real.





Golden Axe: Beast Rider

secret level / sega

xbox 360

The bad news: Beast Rider has been delayed for a fall release. The good news: Beast Rider has been delayed for a fall release. Sega have wisely granted Secret Level the time they need to make Tyriss' solo debut one that will be as legendary as the game that introduced her.



Wall-E

heavy iron / thq

ps3, xbox 360

Pixar's last little robot on Earth—coming to a theatre near you this June—is getting the red carpet game treatment via Heavy Iron Studios, creators of movie gaming gold such as The Incredibles and Ratatouille. Left to clean up our mess all by his lonesome (on Earth...we wrecked it), taking out the garbage has never been so much fun.



No More Heroes

grasshopper / ubisoft

wii

Normalcy got you down? Tired of all the same old same old killing in games? May we direct you to the makers of Killer 7's new portrait of the strange and violent, No More Heroes. In your plight to reach the top ranks of hit man, blood and limbs will fly as you swing the Wii Remote to do the deed. Enter the mind of Suda 51, but don't be scared.

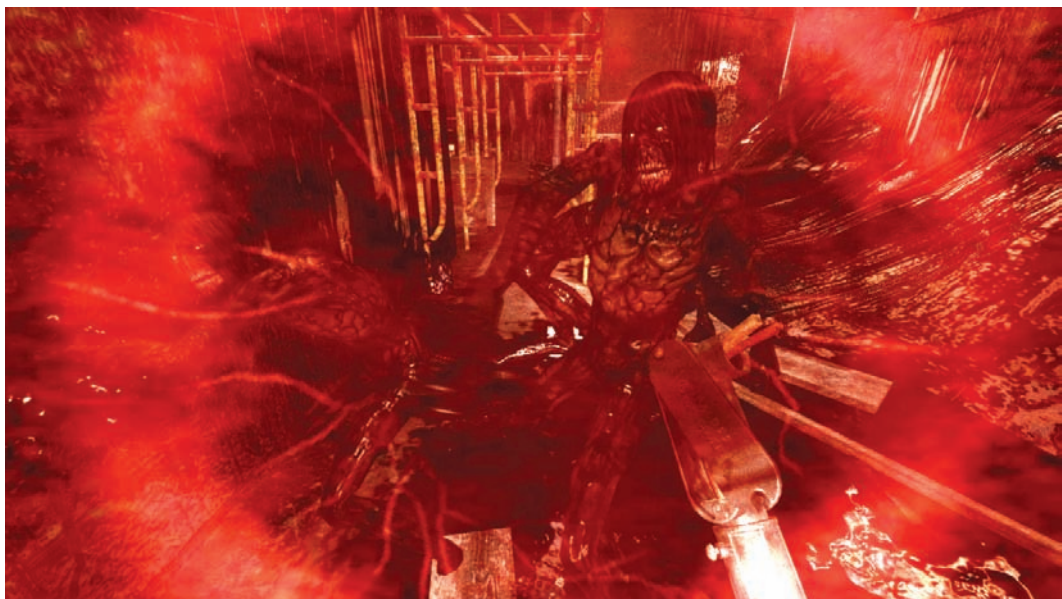
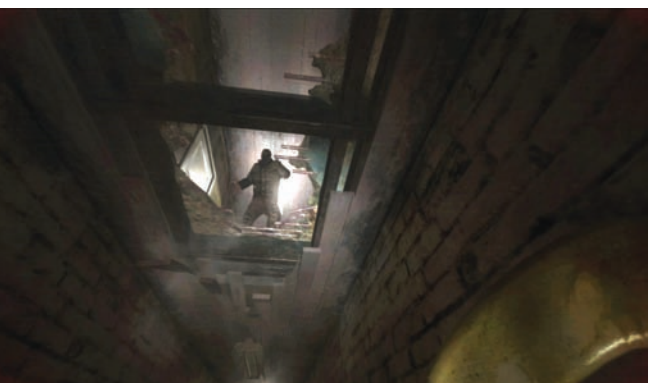


Condemned 2

monolith / sega

ps3, xbox 360

The palpable brutality of Condemned 2 cannot possibly be conveyed by mere words, but I'll try. I nearly wet myself playing through the first chapter as tar-filled madmen sought to crush my bones. I had no choice but to beat their heads in before performing finishing moves that might cause the squeamish to vomit. God I love this game. Pound for bloody pound the best first-person game this editor has ever played.



Viking: Battle for Asgard

creative assembly / sega

ps3, xbox 360

Hel—daughter of the Norse God of Mischief—seeks to unleash the ancient wolf-god Fenrir which legend tells will bring about Ragnarok (the apocalyptic battle that will destroy Asgard and the Gods). When the war spills over into the mortal realm of Midgard, only the mighty Skarin can turn the tide. This is a job for an epic adventure game!



Mirror's Edge

dice / ea

ps3, xbox 360, pc

As if 2007 didn't yield enough stellar first-person shooters, along comes Swedish developer DICE with a promise to revolutionize the genre. Their emboldened efforts are to remove every single barrier you're used to facing in the first-person view, redefining the way you move through the environment and approach the action. How do they plan to do that? Mum's the word, but mean time, check out those incredible screen shots to get the ball rolling...





Ninja Gaiden 2

team ninja / microsoft

xbox 360

Ninja Ryu Hayabusa returns for another pleasant tea garden adventure complete with unforeseen circumstances and a most unexpected guest. And by that it is meant Hayabusa attempts to save the world by killing thousands, perhaps quintillions, of his enemies. Expect new weapons, a less punishing health system, and such pleasures as decapitations and limb dismemberments in this slickly done third-person adventure.



Soulcalibur IV

project soul / namco bandai

xbox 360, ps3

Namco promised that the soul still burned, and lo-and-behold, they were right. Assets for the game have been ... suggestive ... of huge new volumes of ... graphics. Both PS3 and the 360 will feature online fights, so get ready to ... bounce ... on over to a match.



Rygar: The Battle of Argus

tecmo / tecmo

wii

Peeled from PS2 disc and completely rejiggered for Wii, Rygar is among the biggest beacons of hope for Wii gamers coming off of Super Mario Galaxy in search of another action game that pushes the Wii hardware. Tecmo says, "New Hero, New Enemies, Swing Action." We say bring it on.



Tomb Raider: Underworld

crystal dynamics / eidos

ps3, xbox 360

Lara's 360/PS3 debut sees a return to the mysterious gameplay of old with a new emphasis on realistic physicality and topographic dynamics that makes it all the more epic in that special Tomb Raider way. She still shoots her way out of trouble but the star of the game this time is really the terrain itself and of course the forever-young Miss Croft.



Hellboy

krome studios / konami

ps3, xbox 360

Who didn't see this delay coming? Krome Studio's amazing Hellboy game will now rise closer to Guillermo Del Toro's second hellacious epic. The game—which features Liz, Abe, and the red ape we all know and love as Hellboy—is everything you'd expect from a next-generation film prodigy and more. H2 could go down in movie gaming history (in a good way).



The Club

bizarre creations / sega

ps3, xbox 360

Bizarre Creations is a long way from Fur Fighters country with The Club—a mixture of action/shooting and point-based combat centered on a shadowy underground blood sport... First rule of The Club: never use the cliché I was about to. Choose from eight contestants and fight for your life this Feb..



Monster Madness EX

psyonix / southpeak

ps3

Zack, Carrie, Andy, and the bodacious Jennifer return in the sole surviving top-down action-shooter that is Monster Madness (EX). Much improved from the underrated 360 game, EX includes Online Co-Op, character customization, 25 new levels and all new bonus content. Time to go chopping!



Mushroom Men

red fly studio / gamecock

wii, ds

In between finding witty ways to hype their cleverly deemed brand the fine folks at Gamecock have been busy plucking away at their initial lineup including Mushroom Men, a thoroughly fresh new IP in which three-inch-high Mushroom Men go to battle in the human world after crashing to Earth via comet. Will they reign victorious or end up on a pizza?



Oboro Youtouden

vanillaware / tba

wii

The Wii event of 2008 (for my money at least) will be Vanillaware's third sweeping 2D hand-drawn epic which, as of press time, hasn't been announced for a US release, just as No More Heroes wasn't announced at this time last year. Surely Atlus is on the job. In any case, a US release is imminent.



Halo Wars

ensemble / microsoft

xbox 360

Halo—before Bungie was snatched up by Microsoft—was originally set to be a Mac and PC-based real-time strategy game. The upcoming Halo Wars, from Bungie and Ensemble Studios, will be... a real-time strategy game, taking place a short time before the events that unfold in the original Halo. The universe works in mysterious ways sometimes.



Battlefield: Bad Company

digital illusions / ea

xbox 360, ps3, pc

Battlefield: Bad Company will be the first game in the Battlefield series to have been completely developed for next-gen consoles, bringing with it near totally destructible environments, which when added to the new classes, weapons, vehicles, and other upgrades, will provide for strategic and gameplay possibilities unheard of in most other first-person shooters.



Dead Space

ea redwood shores / ea

xbox 360, ps3

Outer space is far too under-represented in the survival horror genre, but EA Redwood Shores is set to change that with *Dead Space*, a first-person sci-fi horror shooter in which answering a distress call ends up a fight for survival aboard a derelict ship overrun with horrific alien creatures.



Saints Row 2

volition / thq

xbox 360, ps3

With the original *Saints Row* being known as much for its multi-player as it was for the single-player storyline, *Saints Row 2* will be kicking all that up a notch, now allowing players to play through the campaign with a friend either locally or over Xbox Live, in addition to adding quite a bit of depth to both character and gang customization.

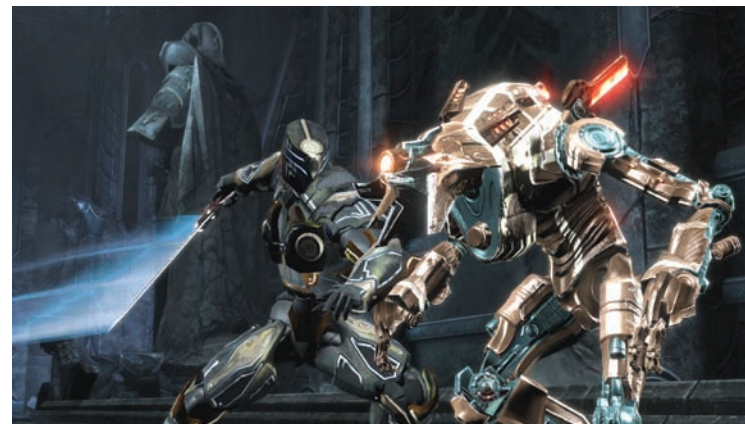


Haze

free radical / ubisoft

ps3

With *TimeSplitters* on the back burner, Free Radical gets a little more serious in their latest attempt at first-person shooting. The plot's a bit, um, hazy, but while the game begins with you fighting for the dubious good guys while yipped up on a superdrug called Nectar, eventually you stumble into the camp you've been trained to destroy. This one's been quietly nearing its release, but as any fan of *TimeSplitters* will tell you, Free Radical knows how to deliver the FPS goods.



Too Human

silicon knights / microsoft

xbox 360

Part role-playing, part action, part science fiction, part Norse mythology, part fantasy, big part anticipation. Labeled by Silicon Knights president Denis Dyack as the most misunderstood game out there, you're about to find out for yourself what the dark wizards in Edmonton have actually been brewing for the past few years.

White Knight Story

level 5 / scea

ps3

This PS3 RPG from Level 5 proudly includes a customizable sidekick and giant transformations into Evangelion-sized Knight-Mechs. Ever since the trailer in 2006, we've been looking forward to the lush environments and physically realistic battles. A demo on the Tokyo Game Show floor featured fully variable attack combos, which players pre-program like a slower, shallower version of *Godhand*'s fight system.



Super Smash Bros. Brawl

nintendo / nintendo

wii

This massive melee just got more interesting with the addition of Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog and Konami's Solid Snake. Players can expect a wealth of cool characters (Zero Suit Samus, Mario, Wario), and a host of goofy new powerups such as a Nintendogs attack which—what else?—obscures the gameplay screen with delightful puppies.





Sega Superstar Tennis

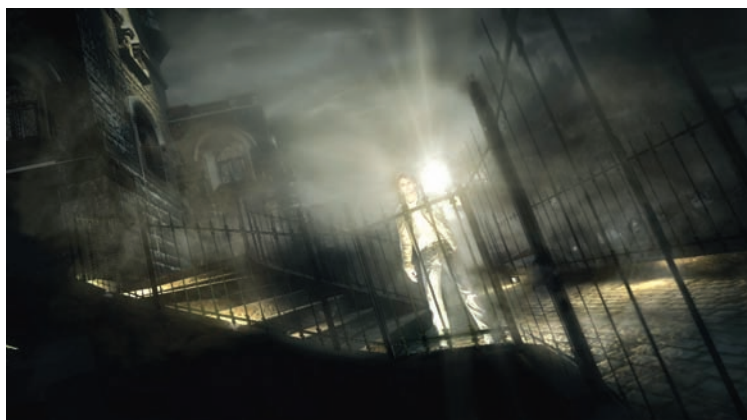
sumo digital / sega ps3, xbox 360, wii, ps2

Inserting brand-name characters into various sporting venues has become a veritable cottage industry, but no game does it as well as Sega Superstar Tennis. Including characters from Jet set Radio, Virtua Fighter, Space Channel 5, NIGHTS, Sonic, and more (many more) each character possesses brand-specific moves and the game plays like a dream. Sega knows tennis.

Infinite Undiscovery

tri-ace / square enix xbox 360

Another gorgeous RPG for the 360, the premise of this title is that there are many undiscovered things in the world...so many, that you could say they were infinite. A villain ensnares the moon in chains, and a group of young heroes sets out to stop him. Environmental statuses affect your combat, or so the developers have suggested...



Alone in the Dark

eden studios / atari ps3, xbox 360, ps2

Don't you dare be alone in the dark in Central Park, because scary monsters and conspiracies will be your undoing. Because I know you won't heed my warning, use your ingenuity and grab a few items lying around to create a weapon or tool to proceed further down the collapsing trail of electrified waterways and burning debris. Very cool how that fire reacts realistically to the materials you place in its way...

Highlander

widescreen games / eidos ps3, xbox 360, pc

Highlander—a brand that has seen more highs and lows than a Cheech & Chong movie—is finally set to receive its definitive video game courtesy of Widescreen Games and Eidos. The game begins in New York City where Owen MacLeod learns that his only chance to defeat the mysterious figure ripping the big apple apart to get to his head lies in reuniting three fragments of a mysterious stone that, when whole, is reputed to grant unlimited power to the Immortal that possesses it. Time to go... 1st Century Pompeii, 9th Century Scotland, and 14th Century Feudal Japan beckon.



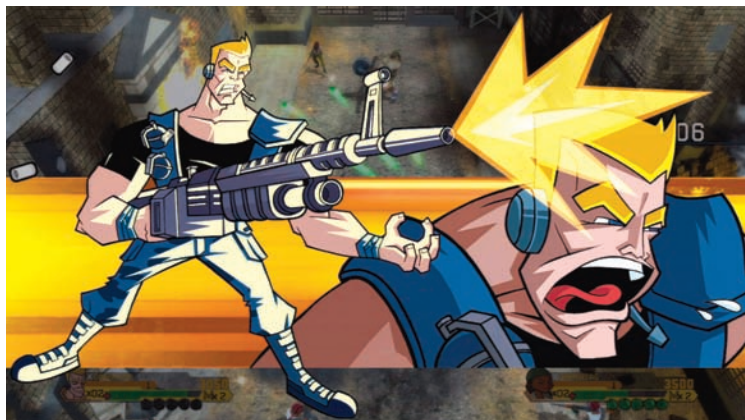


Darksiders: Wrath of War

vigil studios / thq

xbox 360, ps3

With fast-paced shooting and slashing action melded to a Zelda/Metroid-esque free-roaming structure, Darksiders made quite an impression in its debut at the 2007 E3—but there hasn't been a peep about it since. Hopefully THQ and Vigil Studios won't let much more time pass before giving us a second look at this promising title.



Commando 3

backbone / capcom

xbox 360, ps3

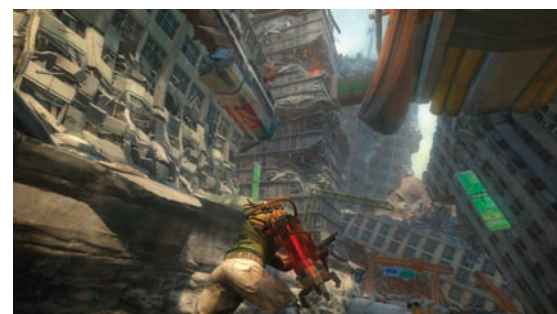
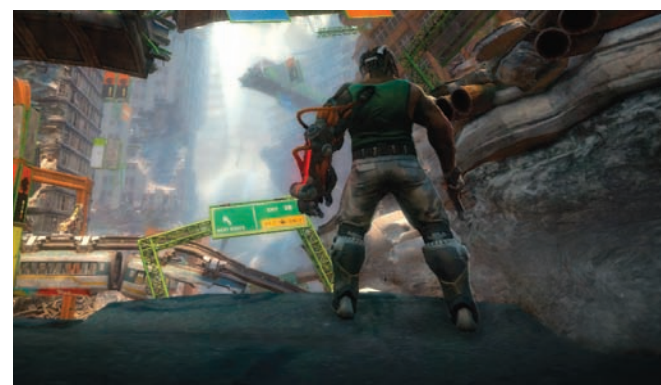
Commando is one of those middling series that many people have fond memories of, but not so fond that they'd be willing to drop \$60 for a next-gen sequel. Once again, XBLA and PSM have come to the rescue, providing a home for a spiritually-faithful sequel with 3-player online co-op and a soundtrack by Metal Gear Solid composer Norihiko Hibino, all for a mere 10 bucks. Can't beat that.

Little Big Planet

media molecule / SCEA

ps3

Look, we like shooting people in the head and dismembering what's left, and it's arguably even more enjoyable in the company of a good friend, and arguably even more so when it's the friend whose brains are splattered. But doesn't a change of pace sound nice, joining hands as we guide adorable little ragdoll creatures through a delightfully pint-size world of bouncy, squishy, churning objects all forged to our creative liking? PS3 needs Little Big Planet as much as your soul needs Little Big Planet.



Street Fighter IV

Capcom / Capcom

xbox 360, ps3

Street Fighter IV is being built on a foundation of—gasp!—polygons. Is it time to step away from the past and embrace the new frontier of slick HD and its natural 3D progression, or does Street Fighter demand the comfortable precision of the old guard? Sure does look damned pretty regardless...



Ghostbusters

terminal reality / sierra

ps3, xbox 360, wii, pc, ps2

Celebrate life. The four original Ghostbusters (Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, and Ernie Hudson) are reuniting for Ghostbusters the game. This new spectral adventure is meant to be a continuation of the most excellent Ghostbusters movies and its story will be written by Aykroyd and Ramis. Who you gonna call? That's damn right, skippy.

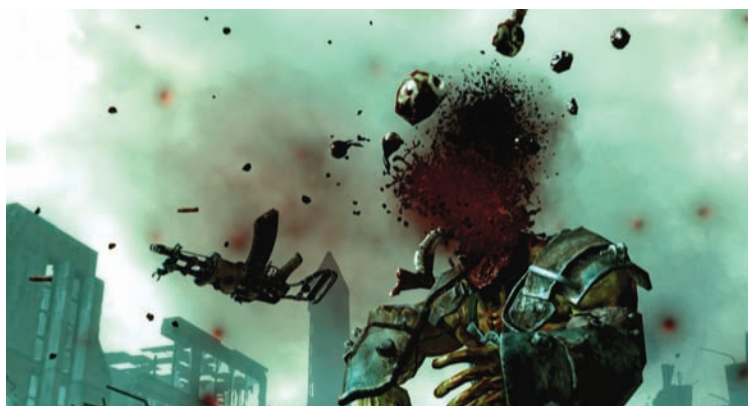


Fallout 3

bethesda / bethesda

xbox 360, ps3, pc

The cult favorite series goes first person in Bethesda's careful re-rendering of the dark-comedy alternate history sci-fi story. The best parts of the demo included throwing mini-nukes (which would flash white and leave tiny mushroom clouds behind), and the morally ambiguous choices the hero can make. Pip Boy returns!



GTA IV

rockstar north / rockstar games

xbox 360, ps3

A Russian anti-hero comes to New York City for the biggest game of 2008. Everyone already knows about this one, as new trailers for the game have become online events. Weather, independent pedestrian AI, and a giant exterior/interior landscape are among the chilling features that Rockstar's mini Matrix promises. The game is both PS3 and 360, but Rockstar has suggested that all further game development is going to be PS3 exclusive.



Dragon Quest Swords

Bing / square enix

wii

The Wii game that promised a sword-fighting Dragon Quest adventure, this may be the biggest disappointment for DQ fans since DQ: Monsters Joker. A light-hearted, easy action game, you swing your Wiimote like a sword (or hold it in the air like a baton) along a preset, on-rails path through the countryside. If you want to wave your wand at Slimes, then this is the one for you. Otherwise, it may be a wise decision to wait for DQIX.

Fable 2

lionhead / microsoft

xbox 360

Peter Molyneux's Fable 2 is a role-playing game with a heart. Molyneux promises he will make you feel something with the followup to the popular Xbox game Fable, and is allowing players to access a dog companion to further the effort. There will also be copious monster-whalloping, sword- and gunplay, and the opportunity to buy every single building in the game...





MGS4

kojima productions / konami

ps3

Who doesn't know about this PlayStation 3 exclusive yet? Hideo Kojima's epic post-modern game series continues with old Snake and young Raiden. The trailer screams that Snake will KILL LIQUID, but the details behind the game remain shadowy. The once third-person title now sports a first-person play scheme, for maximum adoption in the West.



Infamous

sucker punch / scea

ps3

Sucker Punch, the talented developers who brought you Sly Cooper, have traded in the light for the what appears on the surface to be the very dark in Infamous, a sand-box adventure in which you get to play shadowy superhero. If any comparisons are made to Crackdown in the early anticipation, consider that a good thing...

Dark Sector

digital extremes / d3

ps3, xbox 360

For everyone who dreams of commanding a boomerang that hacks humans apart, Dark Sector is your ticket to bliss. The nasty little device in question is called the glaive, which removes arms, legs and heads while also serving as a great hacksaw at close range. But more than an efficient weapon that accompanies your basic armament of firearms in Dark Sector, the glaive works as a retrieval mechanism as well as an elemental collection tool, absorbing, say, electricity to power a machine.



Lost Odyssey

mistwalker / microsoft

xbox 360

A sweeping role-playing game, Lost Odyssey tells the story of the immortal Kaim as he relives past memories; forms adventuring parties and ventures out into a big, bad, and beautiful world; and fights in turn-based battles where a character's positioning is crucial. Japanese game magazine Famitsu praised Lost Odyssey, giving the game a very respectable 36 out of 40, but for American audiences the game remains, largely, a mystery.



Mercenaries 2: World in Flames

pandemic / electronic arts

ps3, xbox 360, ps2

As a mercenary in war-torn Venezuela, players are free to align themselves with different factions, take on missions, blow stuff up, build their own stable of mercenaries, and explore a totally huge (and destructible) world. This time around, Mercenaries will be able to swim and two players can engage in online cooperative play.

Witchblade

What a tangled web witches weave

words Dave Halverson

While the animation and detail continue to vacillate—the series still looks great, it's just not on par with the amazing debut episodes—the story shows no signs of letting up.

As we reach the series half-way point the battle lines are becoming more clear—not only between the Douji Corporation's Witchblade (a.k.a. Masane) and the NWSF's Cloneblades but between Masane and her love/hate relationship with Tozawa, her new boss. There's dissension in the Douji ranks over Tozawa's handling of the Witchblade resulting in a power play by fellow exec Masaya Wado (director of the Biotechnology division) that culminates in of all things a drinking contest. Suddenly Tozawa needs Masane as much as she needs him... Meanwhile Takayama and Masane are also growing closer as their investigation into the murderous X-Cons continues. Sooner or later it seems little Rihoko may get herself a stepdaddy. That is, if she survives. She manages to befriend an X-Con and land in the hospital before the Child Welfare Organization rears its ugly head yet again in the most shocking twist yet. Volume 3 has drama and introspection to burn. Not that the action has taken a back seat—Masane's hands are as full as her bust line. *Witchblade* continues to intrigue me with each passing episode. What could have easily spiraled into a mélange of fan service and transparent characters is veering ever further into a character-rich sci-fi, dotted with minor characters to support its epicenter of human frailties. Not to worry though; there are boobs and action aplenty to wash it all down smoothly.

Witchblade

score **9.0**

- +** The story continues to unfold in league with the character development; heady stuff for an action show.
- Continuity breaks in the visual from episode to episode.

Released By FUNimation

Volume 3

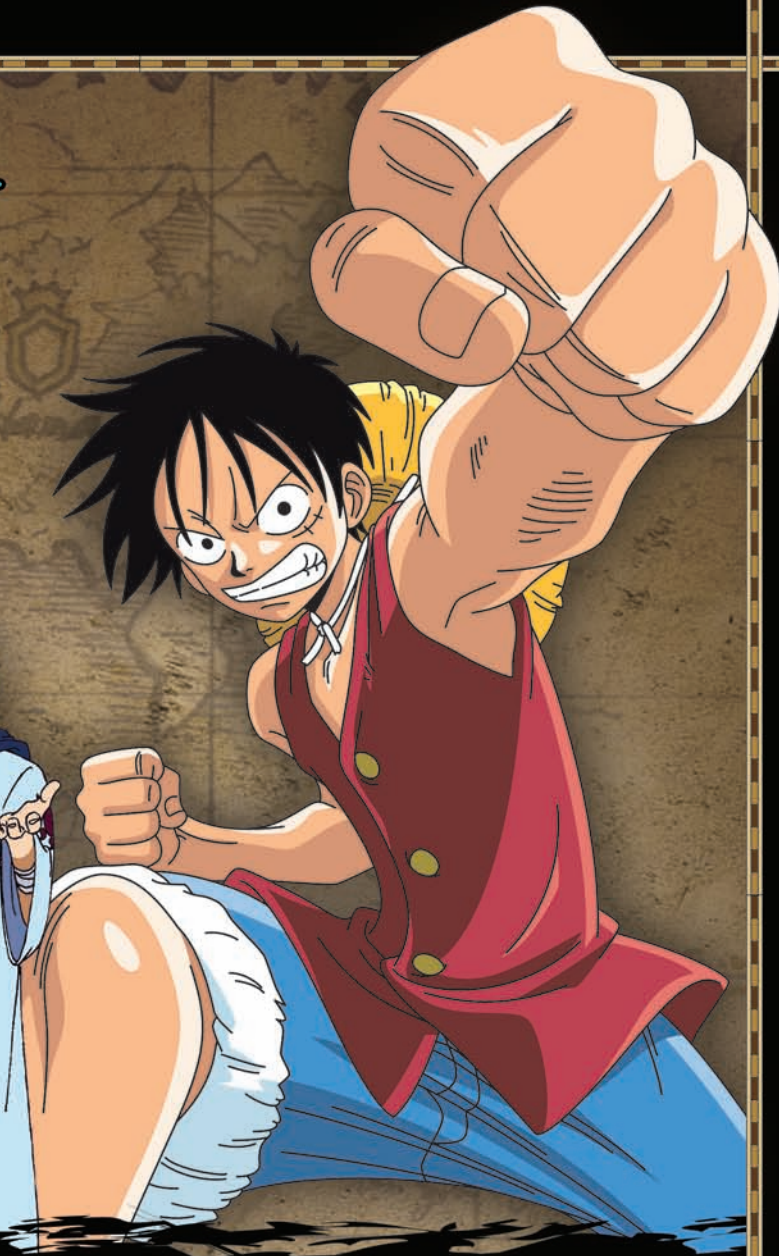
Running Time 100 minutes

Episodes 4

Rating TV MA

Available Now

"Masane's hands are as full as her bust line. *Witchblade* continues to intrigue me with each passing episode."



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Tokyo Majin

Student bodies

words Dave Halverson

there's nothing like a good high school rumble, especially when the adversary is a swarm of undead corpses manipulated by massive supernatural entities from the netherworld. Based on Tokyo Majin Gakuen Kenpuchō for the PlayStation (1998), *Tokyo Majin* spins a wicked tale of unholy deities combated by five high schoolers imbued with incredible powers. A familiar setup for sure, but I assure you that *Tokyo Majin* is worth investigating. Behind the pervasive evil lies a plausible paranormal story where the dead are being reborn to return and kill or recruit more undead for reasons we don't yet know, although it's obvious that something big is looming on the Tokyo horizon. After a spectacular opening sequence depicting an unforgettable abomination we're taken back seven months to witness the origins of the resident evil and the five very different teenagers on which the fate of the world likely resides. Gorgeous animation and stunning monster designs compliment one of the most promising horror series in years.

Tokyo Majin

score **8.5**

- +** Exceptional animation and production, fresh monster designs, engaging story and character development.
- Must everything center around high school?

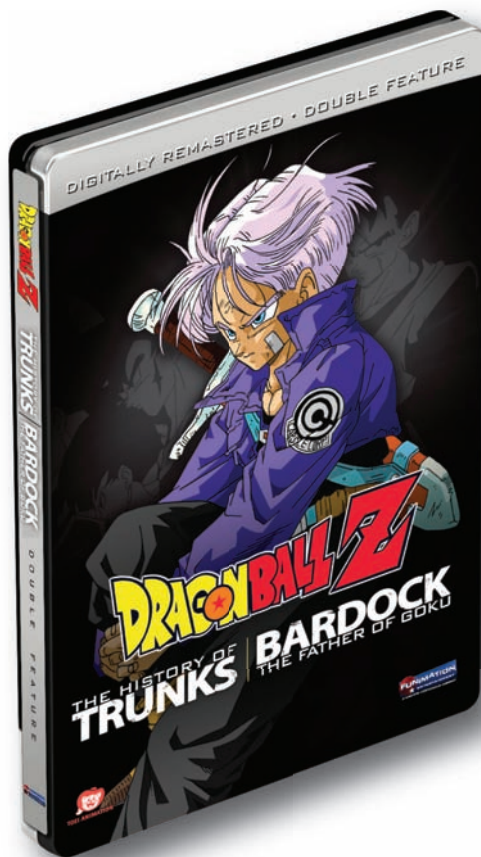
Released By	ADV Films
Volume	One
Running Time	125 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	TV MA
Available	Now

The clique that plays together slays together.



"Behind the pervasive evil lies a plausible paranormal story where the dead are being reborn..."

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Blade of the Phantom Master

Unleash the fury

words Dave Halverson

Like a modern-day *Fist of North Star*, *Blade of the Phantom Master* features a heroic yet stoic omni-powerful protagonist wandering the fallen kingdom of Jushina—a post-apocalyptic landscape based on feudal Korea—where zombies, sadists, and corrupt overlords terrorize what's left of humanity. Munsu is the last Angyo Onshi, or “Amen Osa,” of his kind—secret Government agents that once wandered the countryside in disguise policing the kingdoms. Bear Grylls he isn't however, as we find him crossing the desert without a drop of water. As he lies there, dying of dehydration, a young man named Mong comes to his aid. Mong has set out to become an Amen Osa himself in order to save his girlfriend who has been kidnapped and enslaved by a corrupt lord; so he is in complete awe of Munsu...just before he gets speared through the heart and, after being used for a human shield by Munsu, eaten by a cannibalistic desert tribe. In a twist of irony the overlord who kidnapped Mong's love turns her into a killing machine and turns her loose on Munsu who ends up breaking her and her captors' spell before allowing her to become his Sando, or bodyguard. And so the stage is set for their ensuing adventure which crosses over into the occult and the absurd in equal measure. Based on the 17-volume manga series, *Blade of the Phantom Master* (Shin Angyo Oshi) has everything going for it. Beautifully animated and brimming with great character design, it's also incredibly unique and engrossing. The setting and theme may ring familiar but the execution is anything but... Revel in the unexpected.

Blade of the Phantom Master

score **8.0**

+ A nearly rehash-free story, plus great animation and, as you can see, awesome character design.

- I wish it was a series; it's over too soon.

Released By ADV Films

Volume Movie

Running Time 90 minutes

Rating TV MA

Available Now

Ragnarok The Animation

Saturday Morning Anime-RPG

If you're anything like me, you used to love Saturday morning cartoons. What could be better to a 9-year-old than waking up early to watch four hours of cartoons and eat Chocolate Frosted Sugar Bombs? *Ragnarok the Animation*, based on the popular Korean MMORPG of the same name, would fit perfectly into a Saturday morning cartoon lineup. Unfortunately, I'm not nine years old anymore.

Ragnarok features a plot you've seen, read, and played before: Brash young swordsman Roan and his demure childhood companion Yufa wander through the realm of Midgard, gaining experience and completing quests. Along the way, they pick up various companions of different classes (Thief, Magician, Hunter) and uncover a plot to destroy the world that only they can foil.

In itself, a hackneyed plot wouldn't be so bad, if only the characters had some bite to them, or the world were more fleshed out. It's not like a predictable plot dooms a fantasy anime—I defy anyone to find a fantasy story better than *Lodoss War* or characters funnier than in *Slayers*. *Ragnarok*'s characters are flatter than day-

old pancakes, and they all take themselves so seriously. Lighten up folks! It's not like you won't eventually succeed in saving the world!

To its credit, *Ragnarok* does get more interesting as the series goes on, with the characters rounding into form somewhat. However, by then all but the most credulous pre-teen boy or die-hard *Ragnarok Online* fan will have probably put down the cereal and gone outside to play. **Bill Gray**

Ragnarok The Animation

score **7.0**

- + Over 200 minutes of animation for the price of 100.
- About 20 minutes of that 200 is fun to watch.

Released By FUNimation

Volume 1

Running Time 210 minutes

Episodes 9

Rating TV-PG

Available December 2007



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Top 10 DVDs of 2007

01 Blade Runner Limited Edition Gift Set

Directed by Ridley Scott

Watching the brilliantly modernized *Final Cut*, it's hard to believe that *Blade Runner* was created pre-CGI. Even more astonishing is the mountain of newly produced featurettes which provide keen insight to just how turbulent the filmmaking process was and, moreover, Ridley Scott's steely resolve to get his vision onto the screen. The story behind *Blade Runner* is as compelling as the film which not only holds up, but shot for shot exposes similar CGI fair for the soulless medium that it has become. Anyone lucky enough to grab one of the 103,000 Limited Edition Gift Sets...hold on tight.



02 300

Directed by Zack Snyder

03 Transformers

Directed by Michael Bay

04 The Bourne Ultimatum

Directed by Paul Greengrass

05 Planet Terror

Directed by Robert Rodriguez

06 Children of Men

Directed by Alfonso Cuarón

07 Pan's Labyrinth

Directed by Guillermo Del Toro

08 Death Proof

Directed by Quentin Tarantino

09 South Park The Complete Tenth Season

Directed by Trey Parker/Matt Stone

10 Metalocalypse Season One

Directed by Brendon Small



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